There Are Bodies in the Basement

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/21922273.

Rating:	Explicit
Archive Warning:	Graphic Depictions Of Violence
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hannibal (TV)
Relationship:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Will Graham, Randall Tier, Francis Dolarhyde, Brian Zeller, Jimmy Price, Beverly Katz, Hannibal Lecter, Margot Verger, Mason Verger, Jack Crawford, Alana Bloom, Peter Bernardone
Additional Tags:	Alpha/Beta/Omega Dynamics, Omega Will Graham, Alpha Hannibal Lecter, Alternate Universe - Ghosts, Alternate Universe - Ghost Hunters, Trapped, Kidnapping, Rescue Missions, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Hallucinations, Background Will Graham/Randall Tier, Team Sassy Science (Hannibal), Pack Dynamics, Someone Help Will Graham, Someone Helps Will Graham, Murder Mystery, Mystery, Canon-Typical Violence, Canonical Character Death, Slow Build, Attempted Murder, Arson, Miscarriage, Past Infidelity, Medical Procedures, Masturbation, Graphic Description
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2019-12-23 Updated: 2024-03-13 Words: 57,202 Chapters: 11/?

There Are Bodies in the Basement

by HigherMagic

Summary

There is a single old building on the peak of a steep rise that overlooks a quaint and quiet town on the Eastern Bay. In a word, it is neglected. In several more, it is steadfastly, purposefully, and studiously ignored. The only people who go up there are the ignorant and the idiotic, natural selection doing its best work – those, and the single groundskeeper who is paid more than most CEOs by an unnamed benefactor, and even still he does not venture closer to the building than what it takes to keep the lawn trimmed.

The building is five floors, in total, though the upper two are so damaged by wind and weather that they are completely uninhabitable. The roof has caved in on the offshoot section where people once parked cars – or, back in the older days, kept their horses and carriages. Some theorize it used to be a party hall, some a hotel, others still an old house kept by a family whose names have crumbled along with the stone.

One thing is certain; it has been there since long before the town began, and will certainly linger long after.

Chapter 1

There is a single old building on the peak of a steep rise that overlooks a quaint and quiet town on the Eastern Bay. In a word, it is neglected. In several more, it is steadfastly, purposefully, and studiously ignored. The only people who go up there are the ignorant and the idiotic, natural selection doing its best work – those, and the single groundskeeper who is paid more than most CEOs by an unnamed benefactor, and even still he does not venture closer to the building than what it takes to keep the lawn trimmed.

The building is five floors, in total, though the upper two are so damaged by wind and weather that they are completely uninhabitable. The roof has caved in on the offshoot section where people once parked cars – or, back in the older days, kept their horses and carriages. Some theorize it used to be a party hall, some a hotel, others still an old house kept by a family whose names have crumbled along with the stone.

One thing is certain; it has been there since long before the town began, and will certainly linger long after.

Sometimes teenagers who venture a little too close, daring and drunk and, as previously mentioned, ignorant and prone to pruning by nature's most selective shears, have sworn they've seen movement in the building. Would stake their lives on the notion that they have seen ghostly faces peering out at them. Heard screams, or felt a howl shivering its way into their bones as the wind caresses and groans along with the shifting rafters and unhinged moors. The jaws of the doors gnaw around nothingness, the windows pant and steam as every brick and piece of metal holding the building upright shivers, flexes, grows tight and tense with cold.

The building breathes, and it stares, and that is normally when whoever looks upon it succumbs to their fear and takes their leave, stumbling over their own drunken feet, shoving at each other's shoulders, shouting 'Let's get out of here!' like some children's show from the nineties. A few creep closer. Some even make it to the bottom-most front step.

The building will blink at those, owlishly, turrets and bannisters curling inward like vines around a tree. A wind, whispering and soft, echoes; *Hello, hello, who are you?* The wise do not answer. The brave run away.

The balconies arch like bulging cheeks, the door's barren flower hangings and windowpanes forming a welcoming, albeit gap-toothed smile. The gutters, which have long since lost their integrity with the collapse of the roof, slant down and out, lowered brows of concern over the little wayward souls that have found their way to the building's feet.

It is easy, one might think, to resist the urge to step inside. Cobwebs and birds' nests and cascading old leaves do not romanticize the emptiness of the house. The air is old and wet with rot, mildew, and decay.

He breathes it in, tastes iron and saltwater, curls his fingers around the cold bannister framing the steps, which are weathered and slanting from many years and many feet. All in the center

– people used each other for balance instead of the railings back when this house was in use.

A gust of air, rich with dust and furnished with mold, greets him as the door is pushed open. "Randall," Will murmurs, opening his eyes, lifting them to see Randall dusting himself off, cheeks flushed from the effort of convincing the great doorway to part its lips and show them its tongue. A carpet spreads out in front of them, half-devoured by moths and rats. Inside, it is dark. "Randall, we shouldn't be here. We should leave."

Randall turns, his face split into a wide grin, his eyes etched with red. "You scared, sweetheart?" he purrs, and steps down, slinging an arm over Will's shoulders and giving him a teasing nip on his ear. "Don't worry, I'll protect you."

Will swallows, his eyes on the gaping maw of the open door. "I don't think I'm the one who needs protecting," he says, and he doesn't know why he says it. There is a certain malevolence here, one that he feels brushing along his hands and nosing curiously at the back of his throat. There's only so much imagination can do before he must acknowledge his reaction is basic, primal fear. Not just scared of the monster under the bed, but convinced of its existence. Able to hear it scratching its way through his mattress and ready to take him from below. And if there is one thing an Omega can trust, it is their instincts.

Randall laughs, and heads back up the stairs, turning and holding his hand out to Will. "Come on," he coaxes, and Will's fingers curl. It's a natural reaction to want to reach for Randall, to let the Alpha pull him close and nuzzle and reassure him. But the house, the house keeps *staring*…. "Fifteen minutes. If you still want to leave, we'll leave."

Will breathes in again. Fifteen minutes. He can handle fifteen minutes.

He takes Randall's hand and allows him to pull Will up the stairs, shivering and unconsciously showing his neck when Randall gives a happy purr in answer and nuzzles over his pulse. He wraps his arms around Will from behind again, pressing close. "You smell good when you're nervous."

Will huffs. "Get it out of your system," he says, pushing himself free. "Come on."

Randall grins at him, takes his hand, and pulls Will inside. The building smacks its lips as the door closes behind them, and, with a great heave and groan of pipes, it swallows them whole.

The building has been here long before the town drew its first breath, and will remain for long after. Perhaps it has been eons, or years, or the span of a single heartbeat. As long as a dream and as slow-moving as a nightmare. The building moans under the weight of something so alive within it; it ate too much, too fast.

Serves you right, you little bitch.

It's cold in this place. It's always so fucking cold. Will wraps his hands around his biceps, rubbing up and down in a vain attempt to warm himself up, his breath misting in front of him as he carefully navigates the crumbling, broken steps that lead down to the basement of the building. The heating system is beyond his ability to save, has been ever since he got here, and he passes by it with a woeful look, before following the dark path to the deeper innards of the basement.

He winces, pupils constricting to pricks in his eyes as the fog lights of the groundkeeper's car passes over the house, driving away. He doesn't even try to get the man's attention anymore. The windows grow opaque and the door clenches its teeth so he cannot escape. Worst of it all is *her*, the mistress of the house. She grows angry when Will tries to leave.

Hands brush along his arms from the darkness, well-known to him by now. He forces himself not to flinch away from them, for they have never tried to hurt him, and they're all stuck in this place. Misery loves company, as they say, and Will can admit he has felt nothing short of abject misery for far too long.

Besides, even if the creatures here did try to hurt him, he's incapable of hurting them back. Living things cannot access the realm of the dead, at least not more than once. A one-way ticket he determinedly resists buying into.

One hand is familiar, a young girl with a deep cut across her neck and eyes the color of shallow water. She appears from the darkness and touches his face, gives him a thin smile when Will meets her eyes. "Is there any food down here?" he asks her. "I'm hungry."

She nods, her hair thinned out and flaxen in the darkness, her eyes shining in the familiar way of ghosts. She has begun to rot, her lips pulled back to show bright teeth, her skin hanging off her bones like torn clothes. At her side, a boy appears, bloodied in the stomach – a fresher kill, he hasn't begun to melt yet. Will swallows.

"Do you know where any food is?" he asks them both.

They both turn, and point to a place that is so black and untouched by sunlight that Will, even in the best night vision, cannot see beyond it. But he goes cold and shudders, pulling back when she tries to tug him along. "No!" he snarls harshly, enough to make her flinch. "I don't want to go back there."

That is where the bodies end up, somehow. No matter where they died, they all end up here. Will has only seen the horde once, back when he still had a working flashlight. He still remembers their horrible staring eyes, their yellowing teeth and gaping maws. Some of them had been splayed out, reaching for him like demons. He still has nightmares about it.

The girl gives him a sad smile, though her lips are far beyond the point of making it look like anything but a macabre grimace. She reaches for him again, her fingers passing through Will's like running through mist. Will shivers, and swallows, looking away. He's so hungry. It hasn't rained in too long, so there are no worms and bugs for him to dig out and feast upon. The rats have learned there's a new predator in the house, and keep their distance.

Perhaps the attic. There may be bats up there, or other rodents he can hunt down. Bird eggs and woodpecker hoards and maybe some winter stores from squirrels. It will be difficult to get up there with all the rot and collapsed roofing and God knows what else, but the reward may be richer.

He flinches as he feels another hand touch his shoulder, and turns. It is the ghost of an Alpha that greets him, his touch gentle, his eyes greyed out in the hue of a lifeless corpse, but so familiar. "I don't want to go there, Randall," he whispers. Behind him, the girl with her ghastly smile and the boy with fresh blood staining his belly remain, their auras providing him just enough light to see by. When Will had first seen them, he'd been horrified, so stricken at the sight of them that he'd ran to the room he'd claimed as his own and hadn't come out for days. Now, he is only sad. Poor unfortunate souls. Poor *stupid* kids.

Randall tilts his head to one side. He smiles like the house smiles; brows drawn down, missing teeth, his lower jaw ripped from his body completely so his tongue hangs down in a loose slip of reddened flesh. He takes Will's hand and draws him around, coaxing him towards the back of the basement where the darkness grows so deep, Will cannot see him after a while. But he feels Randall is there, the mist of his presence ghosting along his cheeks, his neck, tactile in that way he had always been.

His toe nudges something hard and dry, sending it skittering, and Will flinches. It is probably a bone, but he doesn't want to look. Doesn't want to see. Randall cups his face and Will opens his eyes, able to just make out the vague whitish shape of him. Randall puts a single finger to his upper lip, smiles, and tilts his head.

Listen.

Will breathes in and holds it, his lungs aching from the wet, cold air. He will get pneumonia come winter if he doesn't find more blankets or clothes. The building is barren, stripped of anything worth using as a living man, but maybe he can negotiate the drapes from their rods, or curl himself up in the carpets. He will find something.

After a moment, he hears it; the skitter of rats, or something that lives within the pipes. All roads lead to Rome; the abandoned kitchen is the only place they can come up for air.

He smiles, and breathes out a sigh of relief. "Thank you," he murmurs, as he turns back towards the stairs. "I'm sorry I doubted you."

The girl with the cut neck and the bloodied boy smile at him, and give him a little wave as he finds the stairs. Randall doesn't follow him up.

"This place gives me the creeps," Beverly complains, shouldering her bag higher up on her neck as she closes the van doors behind her and steps up close to Francis. His head is tilted up, eyeing the house with a detached expression, like a contractor might survey a demolition site.

He sighs. "Me too," he admits. He is laden with their monitoring equipment as well, a large duffle hanging off his shoulder, another bag holding three handheld cameras, a lighting stand tucked under his arm. On his other side, Jimmy and Brian form the rest of his team, and Francis gives Brian a warning look. "If you start humming the Ghostbusters theme tune I'm sending you home."

"Oh, good to know I have a ticket out of this creep show when we inevitably all get murdered by ghosts," Brian says lightly, and Francis rolls his eyes. He huffs a laugh, and strides up the stairs confidently, the rest of them in tow. He pushes the door open, the hinges creaking with a loud wail, and coughs at the answering billow of dust he receives once inside. He clicks on a flashlight and sets its sights scanning around the room, picking up the bottom of the large central staircase, dark stone hallways leading left and right, and the large bare span of the marble floor in front of them.

Beverly dumps her bags and goes to the windows, pushing the curtains open to let the natural sunlight reveal more of the space, and Francis turns his flashlight off. He unloads his own bags and helps Jimmy with their folding chairs and table, setting it up just shy of the door.

"Alright!" Beverly crows, fetching her camcorder and opening it, turning it on. The little red recording light begins to blink almost immediately, and she focuses it on Francis. "Come on, fearless leader, tell us where we are."

Francis sends a playful glare her way, then turns his attention to helping Jimmy and Brian unpack. "If this place had a name, it's been lost for a long time," he says. "Locals will tell you it used to be the house of the guy who established the town, but he abandoned it when his inheritance ran out. Now the only regular visitor is the groundskeeper and tourists."

"And the g-g-g-*ghosts*!" Jimmy adds with a grin, taking out his laptop and setting it down on the table.

Beverly laughs. Francis glares at him again, and rolls his eyes. "Right. Well, yes, it's said to be one of the most haunted buildings in Eastern America, which is certainly saying something," he says. "Every person who's ever come close claims they've seen spirits and ghostly apparitions in the house."

"Where do you want the thermostats, boss?" Brian asks, holding up a series of stands like those that hold microphones, as well as several monitors that look more like the screen of an old cell phone, all on hooks.

"One in each room," Francis tells him. "Most of the sightings have been focused in the front-facing bedrooms, and in the dining room. We'll start there."

Brian nods, and goes to the hallway on the left, first, his stands and monitors clacking as he moves. Jimmy boots up the laptop and begins syncing the camera feeds to their recording software, humming softly to himself as he does so. Beverly walks closer to Francis, clambering awkwardly over the sprawl of devices and bags, and zooms in on his hands.

"For posterity," she says when Francis huffs at her. "This might make a good story and Freddie made me promise to record it. Come on," she adds, grinning, "tell us a bit about

yourself, mister tall, dark, and broody."

Francis blinks at her. He swallows, and sighs, looking down, and makes a show of busying himself with unwinding the power cords and setting up the lighting.

"I'll play host," Jimmy says, and waves her over. Beverly nods, and approaches him. "Hey everyone, Jimmy Price here. I'm running this fool's mission with our team lead, Francis, our tech guy Brian, and of course, the beautiful and glorious Beverly Katz."

"Yo!" Beverly says, and turns the camera on herself to give a peace sign. She laughs when Jimmy grins at her, and turns the camera back on him. "Walk us through our equipment then, oh he who knows everything ever."

"Gladly," Jimmy replies with a flourish. "So we're going to be setting up monitors that will detect any changes in temperature. It's colder than a yeti's asscrack here, but ghosts are supposedly even colder, and manifestations from the spiritual plane will cause a significant temperature drop. If any of the devices Brian is setting up sense anything, we'll get an alert and can go investigate."

Beverly nods.

"We also have EMF readers which essentially do the same thing, only for electromagnetic variations which, in theory, ghosts also create. The lights will be set up with static recording devices for video, so we'll be able to see if anything moves in rooms we're not in."

"And what exactly are we expecting to find?" Beverly murmurs, and turns the camera back on Francis. Francis goes still, and looks up at her. Both her expression and Jimmy's have gone sober, and he sighs, shaking his head, and stands.

"Three months ago, my brother told me he wanted to bring his boyfriend here," he says, purposely not looking at the camera. "He was always into that sort of thing – ghosts, demons, all that shit. Well…." He swallows. "He disappeared. So did his boyfriend. No one's seen or heard from them since, and I figured, well…"

He swallows again, and turns away.

Beverly sighs, and stops recording, closing the camera screen and setting it down. She approaches Francis and turns him with a hand on his shoulder. "You really think we're going to find Randall here?" she asks.

"No," Francis tells her. "In all honesty, I really don't. Even if I did think that, it would mean he's -. That he's dead, and his boyfriend probably is too. At most I'm hoping we see nothing, and that they decided to fuckin' elope or some shit. But even if we don't see anything, it'll be…. I don't know. Closure?"

Beverly sighs, her face soft with sympathy, and Francis clears his throat and rubs a hand over his mouth. "Hey, Dolarhyde!" Jimmy calls, breaking the moment. He holds up a small box and waves it around. "I can't figure out how this thing works."

"Be careful with that," Francis says, and goes to him, taking it from him. "It's a PX; it records frequencies we can't hear and we can play it back. Meant to pick up ghost voices." He shrugs. "I don't know. Guy I got it from swears by it."

"This is all screaming 'Horror Movie 101' to me," Beverly mutters.

At that moment, Brian returns, dusting off his hands. "Yep, I am officially patient zero for the heebies and stage two jeebies," he announces, and Jimmy laughs. Brian walks over and puts a hand on his mate's shoulder, petting through his hair in an effort to calm himself down.

"Do we know anything more of the history of this place?" Beverly asks, shivering in the cold.

"No," Francis says, sighing. "Randall had done some research on the place, but it's all hearsay. Nothing in the news or anything like that. People are too scared to even approach it, nowadays."

"We should do a sweep," Jimmy suggests. "See if we can figure out if anyone's been here in the last few months."

Francis nods, and hands them all camcorders and walkie-talkies. "Stay paired up and don't wander too far. Keep doors open and stay alert," he tells them, and they nod. "Bev, you're with me."

"You got it," Beverly says, and turns her camera back on as Jimmy takes on for himself, Brian manning the other flashlight as Francis takes his back in hand. "Let's get this creep show on the road!"

Will shies back, rat blood smeared along his lips as he hears it. Hears *her*. The ghosts and other things inhabiting this place make no sound. They do not wail, they do not weep. They come and go and flit between shadows like butterflies, never alighting in one spot for long.

Except for her. She moves like a monster, heels clacking on the marble floor in slow, even strides. She has a statue's face and painter's hands, elegant and graceful, tall and, perhaps, once beautiful. Now, though, she is a creature of nightmare and blood. Her hair hangs in strings from her head, dirty and glossy blonde with grease, her eyes wide and lacking lids. Her fingers, curled into claws. She does not shuffle, but strides confidently, ever the lady of the house.

Will opens his eyes and hides beneath the thin blanket he'd managed to find his first week here. Maybe, if he lies perfectly still and calm, she will not see him. She won't notice him in the darkness.

The footsteps draw closer. Cold encases him like water, clogging his lungs, making him choke.

He hears the footsteps stop outside his room. He puts his free hand over his eyes. He's invisible.

He's invisible.

She can't find him.

Don't breathe, baby. Don't make a sound.

The door opens with a slow, harsh creak. Cold sweat pricks at his hairline and he wants to wipe it away. Don't move. Don't breathe. Stay very still. A predator's sight is dependent on motion.

I'm here, sweetheart. I won't let anything happen to you.

He hears her heels again. Closer, growing closer. Hears her rasping breaths, a cold exhale dripping through the blanket like water.

He goes still, tensing, and feels the blanket lift from his feet. He clenches his eyes tightly shut, swallows back his whimper, and refuses to look. Refuses to look as a single pale hand drags up between his legs, taking the blanket with it. Holds his breath and digs his fingers into his palms as the blanket is pulled from his face. His heart slams against the back of his ribs, skittering like raindrops on a window; no rhythm, no reason. Escape, flee, *hide*.

A hand goes around his neck, and he whimpers and claws at it. He parts his lips to scream but nothing comes out – not that there is anyone to hear him, anyway. He feels cold lips around his mouth, jaws parted wide enough to swallow him whole, and hisses as teeth sink around the back of his jaw on either side, ready to rip it clean off. Just like she did with Randall.

He hears, downstairs, a noise. Voices. He gasps as abruptly, the hands and teeth retreat, and the lady of the house moves away with a shrieking noise and a fast click of her heels. Will presses his knuckles to his teeth, sobs around them, and curls up on his side, covering his ears as he hears her screaming.

Beverly has her camera recording again, moving with Francis as they take the first floor, Jimmy and Brain going up the stairs to the second. Francis has the PX in his hand. "Where did you find that?" she asks, nodding to the device.

"A guy I know," Francis replies. "He's a paranormal investigator, works with his team and puts their videos on YouTube. He told me it translates electrical pulses, like the EMF reader picks up, into a pre-programmed vocabulary. The same kind Hawking uses, only it reads electrical pulses instead of eye movement."

"Does it work?" Beverly asks, her eyes wide.

"I've seen it in action, but of course you have to believe in ghosts to really put any credit in it." He sighs. "He told me it's the nasty spirits who tend to use this more often…" He stops, at the entrance to a room that looks like it was once a kitchen. There are piles of little bones all over the place, from dead rats. He frowns down at them and Beverly does a sweep of the floor with her camera, the light on it illuminating the space.

"I'm no blood color expert," she says, nudging a skull, "but some of these look really fresh."

"Maybe the house has a cat," Francis suggests, laughing. "All good horror movies need a jump scare by a cat."

"You're not selling me, here," she teases. They both go still, looking up as they hear the ceiling above them creak, the house moaning as its weight shifts. Francis presses his lips together, and shakes his head.

"Just Jimmy and Brian," he tells her. "Don't get all freaked out on me now."

"I have bigger balls than all of you combined," Beverly replies with a toss of her hair, making Francis laugh. They move past the kitchen and into the first of several large rooms, a dining table taking up most of the room in this one. There are rectangles of white on the walls where paintings once hung, and the table and remaining chairs are covered in a thick white protective cloth. Near the windows, Brian has left one of the heat sensors up, angled to pick up anything between the windows and the table.

Breathing out heavily, Francis approaches the table, and sets the PX upon it. Beverly approaches, frowning.

"You okay?" she asks, nudging his hand. "You're shivering."

Francis blinks at her, then down at his exposed forearms, noting that the hair has risen on them. And he feels a prickle on the back of his neck, like he imagines Omegas feel when an Alpha's eyes are on them. He rubs over his nape, presses his lips together, does another visual sweep of the room.

"Do a round with the camera," he tells her. "We can run it through Jimmy's computer for thermal spikes." She nods, and does a slow 360 around the table. The thermo-sensor crackles with heat as she passes by, making her jump, and then laugh nervously.

"It's those big balls," Francis teases, and Beverly rolls her eyes and tosses her hair again. Francis leans down over the PX, holding his hand up for silence, and presses down on the largest button on the side of it. "Hello?" he murmurs, loud enough for the machine to pick it up. He holds the button down. "If anyone's out there, and wants to say something, now's the time to do it."

He releases the button, and waits for a few seconds. Beverly looks up, hearing the floorboards creak, and mutters under her breath; "I swear to God those guys better hurry it up."

"My name is Francis Dolarhyde," Francis says. Internally, he cringes at this entire enterprise – talking to ghosts, whatever's next? "I'm looking for my brother, Randall. He came here a few months ago and – and if he's still here, or if anyone can help me, speak now."

He waits for another stretch of thirty seconds, and sighs, scratching a hand over his head. "If anything's here it's supposed to just react," he says. Beverly presses her lips together, lowering the camera and giving him a gentle, sympathetic pat to his arm. Francis manages a tight huff of a laugh. "For a second there I really thought that…"

"We'll keep looking," Beverly promises softly. "This is a big house and there's a lot of ground to cover."

"Right," Francis says, and then looks up. He huffs. "I know it's stupid, but I feel like we should check on them."

"Pack Alpha instinct," she says with a playful nudge, and Francis smiles at her. He takes the PX from the table, and they leave the dining room. As they do, almost too silently to hear, the thermo-sensor by the window flickers, crackling quietly, and starts to whine.

Chapter 2

Will's hands are shaking. He counts to sixty, and then again, before he's able to convince himself that the lady of the house isn't going to come back for him. He throws the dirty blanket off his body and scurries out of his room, seeking to put himself as far from whatever drew her attention and himself as possible. She will kill them; she always does. She hates living things in her house. Will has no idea why he's still alive, why she has allowed him to live, but he senses that her patience is going to run thin with him soon enough.

He can't leave the house, and he can't stay here. He can't approach the living ones down below – if they know he's here, they'll try and get him out, and she'll slaughter them all for trying.

He hears voices on the main stairs – two men, from the sounds of it – and flinches back, hurrying to a smaller set of emergency stairs at the other end of the hallway. He pushes through the door, letting it close silently, and peers down through the darkness. He feels out, blindly, until he touches the railing set into the wall.

The air is almost warm, though he's sure that's just a trick of his feverish, freezing body trying to tell him so. It's stagnant, wet in his lungs, and he presses his lips together and goes down them as quickly and quietly as he can, until he reaches the ground floor.

He emerges at the end of a long hallway, all the doors closed. These were once used for parties and banquets; every room is grand enough to host a large group of people. He hurries down the hallway and into the main foyer, freezing when he sees the bags scattered around, the desk with a computer, the hoard of monitoring equipment and gear lying strewn about in what he imagines is a controlled kind of chaos.

He frowns, approaching slowly, his ears pricked for any signs that the living ones will be returning soon. He bends down in front of the computer and nudges the mouse, blinking when the screen wakes up from its idle saver, and he sees cameras set up in station to monitor some of the rooms. There is also a side screen labeled 'Heat Signatures' and small lines that are, currently, unmoving. He frowns, head cocked – the place is cold, so the static temperature is low, but ghosts can make it feel freezing.

He looks to one side, finding a video camera placed on a stand, angled up to the stairs, and is glad he passed behind it. He approaches, noting the full battery, the red LED saying it's recording. He leans in, sniffing curiously.

Alphas, for certain. But softer scents, too; a female. Maybe an Omega. His frown deepens and he huffs a frustrated breath.

"I think they're right above us," a voice comes. A woman. Will shrinks back immediately, darting to one of the thick curtains that is in danger of falling off its rod, by the right front window. It's been pulled back by one of them, but still there is enough space for him to hide behind it, peering out to see a woman coming from the opposite direction he came; one of the

east dining halls. She's holding a video camera, and behind her strides a tall man. An Alpha, from the hue of his eyes. He's holding a box in his hands.

Will's eyes widen in recognition. It couldn't possibly be….

"C'mon, Francis," the woman says, beckoning to the Alpha. Will presses his knuckles to his mouth so he doesn't whine. *Francis*. Randall's older brother. Will has met him several times – he and Randall were incredibly close, especially for sibling Alphas so far apart in age. Randall loved his brother dearly, always tried to be big and brave like him. He told Will that Francis' approval meant everything to him, and that was why Will had been introduced before they begun courting in earnest.

A soft pang of loss wells in his chest, burning the backs of his eyes. He can't let Francis find Randall's body. It would break his heart.

Francis and the woman go upstairs, and Will breathes out once they're out of sight. Behind the stairs is a door that leads to the cellars and the basement, and he rushes for it, pushing through as quietly as he can. It occurs to him, once he is in the cold, dark stairwell, that his journey made him pass right in front of the camera.

He curses to himself, but shakes it off. Maybe, if they can't find Randall's body, Will can trick them into thinking he's a ghost, and they'll leave him be. Maybe the lady of the house will thank him, and let him live for another week untouched.

Jimmy and Brian whirl on them as they open the door, and Brian breathes out, shaking his head sharply. "You scared the shit outta me," he says, aggravated and clipped, and Francis smiles, clapping him on the back in apology.

"Find anything?" he asks.

"There's been some cold spots," Jimmy reports, "but honestly I can't tell if it's just because of natural breezes in the house, or the vents. No moving curtains or frosted glass or any of the, you know, stereotypical stuff."

"Then why are you so ruffled?" Beverly teases, looking at Brian.

"Because this place feels…weird," Brian says, frowning down at his camera. Francis cocks his head to one side and Brian meets his eyes. "Don't you feel it?"

"I think you're just psyching yourself out," Jimmy says gently, leaning close and brushing his forehead against his mate's shoulder in an attempt to soothe him. Brian huffs, eyes flashing with red, and shakes his head again.

"No," he argues. "I feel like I'm being watched."

Beverly frowns, and puts her camera on him, giving him a slow up and down. "I'm not getting any weird thermo readings on you," she says slowly. Brian doesn't answer, merely shakes his head, absently running his fingers up and down Jimmy's arm.

"Did you guys find anything?" Jimmy asks.

"Kitchen, a dining room," Beverly replies. "Whole place is a ghost town, pardon the expression. The kitchen has…fresh-looking shit in it, though. Rat skeletons that look more recent than I would have expected."

Suddenly, in Francis' hands, the PX crackles. He jumps, almost dropping it, and stares down at it with wide eyes. It buzzes, loudly, but no words come out, and he heaves a shuddering breath, pushing down on the large button. "Hello?" he asks. The PX crackles again and goes quiet.

From somewhere, far away, they hear a door slam.

"Alright, that's enough," Brian snaps. He hefts his camera and wraps a protective hand around Jimmy's arm. "We'll go see if the cameras and thermo-sensors have picked up anything, and then we're getting the fuck out of here for the night."

Francis nods, almost absently. The PX has gone quiet again, and he sighs, running a hand through his hair. "Alright," he murmurs. "Let's go."

Will shivers in the cold, gritting his teeth as he feels, blindly, along the basement. The soft glow of watchers gives him just enough light to see the glittering white of old bone, and the thicker, black presence of corpses not quite far along enough in decay to just be skeletons.

He is only here for one of them, and he is terribly easy to find. Randall's body is still relatively fresh, though there are worms settled into the place his lower jaw used to be, and his eyes have been hollowed out by carnivorous insects. Will kneels down, his eyes burning and his throat tight with loss, and he pulls Randall's body to him, hefting him over his shoulder.

He's weak, starved half to death and shivering, but he manages to get his feet under him, and grimaces at the stench of dead bodies as he carries Randall towards the front of the cellar. There are stacks of old shelves here, and the hollow blackness beneath the stairs. He places Randall's body down, as gently as he's able, and shoves one of the shelves over the hole so that he's not immediately visible.

If Francis and his friends come down here, hopefully they won't find him. Will crawls back up the stairs, and freezes as he hears voices coming from the main entryway. Three men, and the woman – four in total. He curses to himself under his breath; the lady of the house won't like that. She hates all living things, but especially Alphas, and with Francis here, and if any of his friends are Alphas, she will be enraged.

A ghostly hand touches his shoulder, and he turns to see Randall standing a step below him, blinking at him with wide reddened eyes. He will, eventually, gain the grey glow of the dead, once his body is decayed enough, once he has been dead for long enough. He wonders how far back the oldest body stretches – if, perhaps, there is a chance that Randall will, one day, fade away and find peace.

Randall points to the door, and cocks his head to one side.

"I can't go out there," Will whispers. "I can't show myself to them."

Randall's brow creases.

"They'll try to help me. They'll try to find your body. She'll come for them." Will shakes his head, tears burning the backs of his eyes. "I can't let her kill them. He's your brother."

Randall blinks, his eyes widening as though in shock. He looks past Will, to the door, and after a moment, his shoulders heave like he's steeling himself, and he walks right through it and out of sight. Will has no power to stop him, and he clenches his jaw and bares his teeth, chastising himself for revealing that it's Francis who has come to visit, this time. He should have known Randall would try to reach out.

"We can leave the equipment here, nothing will bother it," Francis tells them as they pack up the laptop, after making sure all the feeds are still running. "And if someone does, then we'll want footage of that. We can monitor the house overnight from the hotel and see if anything interesting happens."

Jimmy is frowning at the screen. "Hey, Francis?" Francis comes over, and Jimmy points to the screen with the heat signatures. "Did you and Bev case out that room?"

He nods, peering down at the screen. "The heat was Bev," he says, tapping on a spike of it that must be what Jimmy is referring to. "She did a sweep with the camera."

"Okay, but what about this one?" Jimmy asks. There is, a few moments later, a sudden and startling dip of temperature from the thermo sensor by the window of the dining room. Francis frowns. "Did that happen while you guys were in the room?"

"No," Francis says, shaking his head, and looks to Beverly for confirmation. "Not that I noticed."

"Francis got some hairs-on-end feeling for a minute, but that was before I did my sweep," Beverly informs them, coming over to stand behind Jimmy's chair and look as well. She blinks, and points to one of the sensors on the upper rooms. "The fuck is that?"

There's another dip, there, but it's not a little offshoot, an outlier. The room is very, very cold, colder than the rest of the house, and has remained like that for several minutes at a time, like someone keeps coming into and going out of it.

Francis' frown deepens. "Where is that?"

"One of the upstairs bedrooms," Jimmy tells him. "Um…third one on the right, I think."

Francis meets Beverly's eyes, and she nods. "We'll go check it out real quick," she says.

"Absolutely not," Brain hisses, his teeth bared and eyes red. "We're *leaving*."

"Brian, if there's something up there -."

"Then I don't want it anywhere near me, *or* any of the rest of us," Brian finishes.

Francis glares at him, and gathers the PX. "You guys can wait outside if you want," he says sharply. "I'm going to go check it out."

"Francis, that doesn't seem like the smartest decision," Jimmy says weakly, his head lowered in deference, but his voice steady. "We can come back tomorrow, but we're losing daylight and I don't want to be here come nightfall."

Before Francis can answer, the PX crackles in his hands, loudly. All of them tense up, staring down at it warily. It whines, clicks, crackles again. Francis puts the box down carefully and pushes the button. "…Hello?" he murmurs.

The PX does not fall silent this time, but continues to buzz with a static sound. Then, after a moment, it goes silent. Francis sighs, but before he can say anything, it whines sharply, and a robotic voice comes out of it;

"France….Is…. France is. France is."

"Is it…trying to say your name?" Beverly whispers.

"Oh, that's fucking it," Brian growls. He closes the laptop and hauls Jimmy to his feet. "We're leaving."

Francis swallows, and pushes the button again. "Are you trying to say something to me?"

"Francis, we have to *go*," Brian hisses.

The PX crackles again. Whispers, soft and flat; "It is…. Ran. Doll. France Is. Ran doll."

"Holy shit," Beverly whispers. She fumbles with the camera, turning it back on and pointing it at the box. "Francis, keep talking."

Despite Brian tugging on him, Jimmy hasn't moved either, his eyes wide and fixed between Francis and the PX.

"Randall?" Francis says, his voice shaky, fingers trembling as he presses the button down so he can speak.

"Yes."

Francis gasps, his free hand covering his mouth, eyes turning bright. He muffles a harsh sound, much like a sob, into the palm of his hand, and shakes his head. "It's not him," Brian insists. "Whatever fucked up thing is happening here, they just heard our names. Heard his name. It's not really him, man."

"Will. Is. Here," the PX buzzes. "Save. Will. France is. Will is…. Alive."

"Where are you?" Francis demands.

"I do…not know. It is dark."

Abruptly, the PX goes completely silent. Upstairs, a sound comes. Like a loud wail, an inhuman shriek, and the sound of breaking glass.

"Fuck this noise," Brian snaps, and grabs Jimmy by his scruff, forcing him towards the doors. Francis is frozen, unable to move, and Beverly comes forward and touches his arm. He shakes his head, breathing heavily, his face now coated with tears that he doesn't seem to notice are falling. "What the fuck?"

They turn, to see Brian yanking at the handle. But the door doesn't budge. Outside, it looks too dark to be the time it is, and the house yawns widely, shivering in the cold, and the windows, slowly, turn grey. And then opaque, so no light gets through at all.

The wailing has gone quiet, but in the silence, amidst their unsteady breaths and soft, scared rumbling, comes the sound of footsteps. Slow, steady, and unhurried. It sounds like high heels on tile.

"What the fuck," Beverly whispers. They all turn on flashlights and angle it up the stairs. Nothing moves, nothing stirs, but the sound of encroaching footsteps gets louder. Brian tests the door again, cursing loudly when it doesn't budge.

The PX whines, loudly, and there comes from it a single word; "*Hide*."

"Alright, alright, everyone with me," Francis snaps, abandoning the PX and the equipment. He grabs Beverly, and she reaches out and takes Jimmy's hand, the four of them forming a line as Francis leads the way into the kitchens. It's the only place in the house he knows with only one entrance. They all file in, and Jimmy makes a weak, disgusted sound as they kick at the rat carcasses, sending them scattering.

Francis shoves the door closed, breathing hard. "Everyone remain calm," he murmurs, pressing his ear to the door. "Bev, see if there's anything in here we can use for a weapon. Jimmy, open the laptop and watch the stairs. Brian, help me with the door."

Brian nods, and parts from Jimmy with a single shoulder squeeze, as Jimmy finds a spot on an abandoned table and opens the laptop. The glow from the screen makes him look pale, shaken with fear. Beverly takes her flashlight and begins her search of the room. There isn't much left, but she finds a single large cooking pot with a handle, and two fire pokers by the stove, which she sets on the table by Jimmy's laptop.

"Anything?" Francis hisses. He can't hear the footsteps.

"No," Jimmy replies softly. He leans in, squinting, and turns up the brightness on the screen. The room is so dark, only their flashlights and his laptop illuminating the space. Beverly comes to him, gently kneading his shoulder as she joins him in watching.

"I can't hear anything," Brian whispers. They're facing each other, Brian and Francis, their ears to the door. Francis frowns, and sighs through his nose. "Do you hear anything?"

Francis shakes his head, cursing himself for leaving the PX behind. They're essentially blind in here, trapped.

"What was wrong with the door?" Beverly asks. "Why couldn't we get out?"

"I don't know," Brian snaps, turning from the door and glaring down at his feet, arms folded across his chest. "I don't get it, it wasn't locked, it opened just fine for us coming in."

Francis presses his lips together. "Maybe whatever's in this place doesn't want us to get out."

"Great," Brian hisses. "Fucking fantastic. So what's our plan now, fearless leader?"

"Shut up and let me listen," Francis growls.

There's silence, for so long it feels like a day, and then Jimmy suddenly gasps, his eyes widening as he looks at the screen. "Guys," he says, weak and thick with fear. Brian goes to him immediately, taking his hand and nuzzling it, and Francis joins him. They look at the feed from the camera pointing at the stairs.

Jimmy has rewound it, the timestamp for almost half an hour before the current time. "Look," he says, and points to the screen, pressing play. A shadow darkens the screen, and then, from one side to another, passes the shape of a man. Francis' eyes widen.

"Will," he breathes.

"What?" Beverly asks.

"That was – play it back. Pause it with him in frame, if you can," Francis orders. Jimmy nods, and obeys. The feed is grainy, and so dark it's difficult to tell, but Francis recognizes that wild hair, the shape of his face even half-turned away. Sees the mark on his neck Randall laid when they started courting each other. "Holy shit, that's Will. Randall's boyfriend."

"You're sure?" Beverly whispers.

Francis nods. "I'd stake my life on it." He turns to look at the door, brows lowered. "He's been here, all this time…."

"Months," Jimmy says, breathlessly. "He's been here for *months*."

Francis swallows. He can't imagine being stuck here for so long, trapped in this awful place. And if Randall used the PX, that means he's…. "Randall's dead," he says, voice flat. "And he

asked us to save Will. If he's been trapped here, he might know another way out."

"If he knew another way out he wouldn't be trapped here," Brian argues. "And we don't know if that's actually…*Will*. Alive, I mean."

"Randall said he was alive."

"I'm not trusting some robot voice coming from a magic box in a fucking haunted house!" Brian snaps. "And then there's that…whatever the fuck that thing is we heard. There's something *evil* in this place, man, and we have to get the fuck out of here before we end up like one of those spirits."

"I think these are iron," Beverly says, holding up one of the pokers. "Everyone knows ghosts are repelled by iron. If they attack us we can use these."

"Superstition and hearsay," Brian scoffs.

"Do you have a better idea?"

"Holy shit, guys, look."

They turn back to the laptop, and Jimmy has brought it up to the current time. There's a black maw of shadow at the top of the stairs, but from it descends a pair of feet. In high heels. The skin of the woman is greyed-out and sallow, and there are chunks missing from her thighs like something has been eating her. She wears a dress that once must have been floor length, given the wisps of fabric that fall behind her, but has been moth eaten and torn to shreds, so it barely covers her body. It reveals her feet, her thighs, parts of her stomach, which is also hollowed out and ripped apart to show the bottom of a gleaming ribcage, hollow where organs should have been.

Her hands are clawed, dragging down the bannister as she walks. Her face is barren of most of its flesh, her eyes bright and wild-looking, her teeth permanently bared from her missing lips. Her hair, stringy and greasy-looking, hangs in limp strands down to her chest.

She pauses at the bottom of the stairs, and looks around, before her eyes alight on the camera. Her head tilts to one side like the tick of a clock, in increments, her neck broken and showing fractured vertebrae. She looks at the camera, and it feels like she's staring right at them.

Then, she smiles, and tilts her head up, chin jerking like she's scenting the air. Her head, slowly, turns down the way they ran, towards the kitchen. Her jaws part, and Francis winces when he hears her unholy shriek.

A single word can be made out amidst the wail; "*Alpha!*"

"Oh, fuck," Brian whispers.

Francis growls, sharply, and takes the second poker in hand, giving Brian the pot. "We work with what we've got," he says. "There's four of us and one of her, and even if this doesn't do shit, we have to try. We have to try and find Will."

"You're insane," Brian says, shaking his head. "This isn't gonna do shit to…whatever the fuck she is."

"She's coming," Jimmy says, his scent sour with fear. He closes the laptop and stands, tucking it into his bag. "She's going to find us, Brian; we can't just cower in here like rats and wait for her to get here."

Brian glares at him, and then down at the pot in his hands. It feels like the temperature in the room drops by several degrees, making all of them shiver, and Beverly jumps with a startled yell when, within the ring of her flashlight, something moves.

It's a girl, with a savage-looking cut across her neck, her skin half-peeled and hanging from her face. Francis raises the iron bar in threat, growling at her. "Stay back!"

She blinks at them, and raises her hands in a peaceful gesture, shaking her head. Her mouth moves, like she's trying to speak, but makes no sound. Behind her, another specter appears, a boy with a bright red stain across his belly. He holds his hands up in the same placative gesture, and he actually has a mouth, still, and his lips move.

"Jimmy, you read lips," Beverly whispers. "What's he saying?"

"He's…" Jimmy stands, squinting at the boy. The ghost blinks at him, and gestures to the door, his mouth moving again. "He's saying she's the lady of the house. We can't stay here – if we stay here by the time night comes, we'll be trapped here forever."

Francis growls, and gestures to the door. "The door's locked," he spits. "We can't get out."

The boy blinks at him again, and then gestures to the bars and pot in their hands. He makes a motion, like he's throwing it, and mouths, 'Break the windows'.

"If we break the window, maybe," Jimmy says.

"It can't be that simple," Brian mutters. "If it was, Will would have done it." He glares at Francis. "They're trying to trick us. We're wasting time."

"So you wanna go out there now?" Francis asks, brows rising.

"If the choice is go out there or stay in here and get ripped to fucking shreds or whatever thing Goddamn ghosts do to you, then yeah, I say we go out and meet this bitch head-on."

"I'm with Brian," Beverly says with a nod. She presses her lips together, holding up her iron poker in readiness. "Best way to go down is swinging, am I right?"

Francis can't help but smile, admiring her attempt at bravery. The cold curls around his fingers, making it hard to convince them to hold onto the bar. He tightens his grip and rolls his shoulders, giving them all a short nod.

"Alright," he says softly. "I'm sorry I got you all into this. But we're going to get out. I swear."

They don't look convinced, but he didn't expect them to. He turns to the door, and the ghosts smile at them as they leave. The girl gives them a salute, and the boy disappears first, the girl fading out into the wall soon after. The temperature rises, but just a little. He can hear the woman's heels outside the door. Hears sharp scraping sounds like metal on metal coming from the outside. She's trying to claw her way in.

"Here goes nothin'," he mutters, and opens the door.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

For those who are curious, Hannibal shows up in the next chapter ;D

Will exhales heavily, cracking the door open as he hears her leave. He shivers, grimacing at the wake of blood and viscera that marks her passage. He hears her heavy, rasping breaths down the hall, his stomach tense and tight with fear as he leaves the cellars and makes to go up the stairs.

Randall appears to him, stopping him in his tracks. He's frowning at Will, shaking his head and pointing down the way the lady of the house and the living ones had gone. Will glares at him. "No," he hisses, and shoves right through him, and past him. "I'm not going after them. She'll kill us all."

Randall appears in front of him again, holding out a hand. What's left of his mouth is twisted in a vicious snarl. "I mean it, Randall," Will snaps, shoving his hand to one side, though all it does is pass through, making him shiver. "I know he's your brother, but he got himself into this mess, and he can get himself out."

Randall glares at him openly, shaking his head. He points into Will's chest, freezing him in place. He can hear the lady of the house shrieking, her nails clawing at the door to the kitchens. The scrape of nails on wood sounds more like metal, a cacophonous groan that makes his spine feel like ice.

Will runs his hands through his hair, shaking his head. Behind him, he hears a loud crackling sound, and turns, frowning at a black box sitting on the table where they had most of their equipment. "Will," the box says, and Will's eyes widen. He stares at Randall, who just glares right back at him. "Do not let them die."

Will snarls, weakly. "What choice do I have?" he demands. "I have no weapons, I can't fucking fight her, Randall. Look at what she did to you!"

"Do you think she will stop at just them?" the box answers, and Randall tilts his head to one side. "Do you think she will just let you go once she is finished? The only way this ends is death or escape, Will." Will swallows, shakes his head, taking a step back from the ghost of his Alpha. Randall reaches for him, tries to cup his face. "You know what you need to do."

"What?" Will whispers, shaking his head again. He wishes he could shove Randall away, do *something*. There's a strange kind of helplessness when fighting against the non-physical. No satisfaction of throwing punches or biting at the threat. Nothing, for months, Will hasn't touched anyone for months, and his hands feel weak, useless as paper.

"Will." Though the voice comes from the box behind him, Will can hear it as Randall, clear as day, as if they are still standing at the steps of the house and Will can still convince him not to go in. His eyes burn with tears he refuses to shed, his throat is tight and tense. He wants to scream, to scream until his vocal cords give out and he vomits up his own lungs.

"Will, please." Randall steps forward, and a ghost of a touch caresses Will's cheek. "This is all because of me. Do not let them die. Do not let yourself fade away. This is the only chance you might ever get."

Will swallows, looking down at his hands. They curl, clench into tight fists, and he bares his teeth at the cold stone floor.

There is only one way out, and it's through the front door. He knows that – he'd tried smashing windows, forcing grates open, crawling through the fucking air vents when he was feeling particularly desperate. There's no way out, because she doesn't let people escape. Her shrieks and cries echo around the empty halls, and Will swallows, turning away, looking at those grand, closed doors. There are so many ways to die, and only one way to live.

He walks, quietly as he dares, no more a disturbance in the air than the ghosts, and goes to one of the bags lying askew on the floor. He kneels down, and finds more extension cords, another set of flashlights, extra batteries. They were smart about it, he will admit, but nothing can be as wise and clever as a house that is this old and this angry.

He sees, buried beneath it all, a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. His mouth curls into a thin smile, and he looks up to see Randall standing near him. "Guess Francis never quite managed to quit smoking," he says, and Randall tilts his head. Will lifts the lighter, tests it. A bright, tall flame leaps up, warm and golden in his vision.

Will looks up at him, and swallows. "I won't ever see you again," he whispers. "If I leave, then that's…. That's the end of it."

Randall kneels, and touches his hand as best he can when he is not of this world. The box crackles and buzzes with static near Will's head, and Randall touches his cheek, smiles, and rests their foreheads together.

"It is okay, sweetheart," the box says, too stilted to really be genuine, but Will can see Randall's eyes, and hear his voice like an echo in his head. Will swallows, sucking in an unsteady breath to try and get control of his tears, and cups Randall's mangled face.

"I need time," he whispers. "Can you get me that?"

Randall nods, and stands, his eyes fixed and narrowed on the hall down where the lady of the house is trying to kill his brother and his friends. "Go now," the box says, and it abruptly goes completely silent, as Randall melts from his vision.

Will stands, and hurries to the cellars. The cobwebs grow thick, and he takes as many of them as he can, piling them on the stack of bodies in the far reaches of the basement, where it's almost too dark to see. The boy is there, glowing enough for Will to make sure he doesn't fall over anything, and Will has evolved excellent night vision in this place.

No one reaches out to try and stop him. The boy is giving him eager nods, and gesturing to pieces of dried wood Will can use as kindling.

Will swallows, once it's done. He takes the pack of cigarettes, and lights the corner of the box, and throws it onto the dried twigs and curls of spiderwebs. He kneels down, lighting the edge of one of the shelves, takes down one of the protective furniture sheets and lights that too. He drags one of the old barrels of abandoned alcohol – brandy, he would guess, from the smell. He tips it out and lights the spill, watching as the flames lick it up happily, illuminating the piles and piles of bodies.

He sees them all. Their staring eyes and parted jaws, their reaching hands. He shivers, and turns away. Hesitates at the bottom of the stairs.

After a moment, the air so thick with smoke it's getting difficult to see, he moves the shelves from Randall's body and throws him on the fire, too, so he can finally be at rest.

He rushes up to the main room, finds the curtains half-hanging and lights the bottom of them. Anything that looks flammable, he sets ablaze, until the entire main entryway is fringed in a heavy ring of fire and smoke. The house coughs around him, the windows blinking open so he can see the dusk light coming in from the outside. They're running out of time.

He strides to the hallway leading to the kitchen. The lady of the house is no longer outside the door, and he watches as the door opens, Francis and his friends leaping out as though prepared to fight. They freeze, when they see nothing is there, and Will cups his hands and calls to them.

"Francis!" he yells. Francis' head snaps to one side, eyes widening when he sees Will. He straightens, lowers his weapon, and the other three blink owlishly at him. An Alpha, Omega, and female. What a balanced group.

"*Will*," Francis breathes, and runs to him, putting a hand on his shoulder as though needing to confirm he's actually there, that he's alive and real. Will sees the tear marks on his face, and knows he already knows the truth.

He hears an unholy shriek, and turns, gasping at the sight of the lady of the house standing at the top of the stairs. Her wide, unblinking eyes fix on Will, and she lets out another grating cry, snarling at him. Will pulls Francis and his friends behind him, shielding them from her wrath.

"Go to the door," he says frantically. "It will open."

"We already tried the door," the other Alpha snaps. "It's sealed shut."

"The house is on fire," Will replies, just as sharply. "And it has parasites in its lungs. It'll open."

The woman yanks the Alpha's shoulder, and races to the door, coughing and covering her mouth. The Omega follows behind, and so it's just Will and Francis, staring the lady of the

house down. Francis' hand tightens on Will's shoulder, and Will looks at him, sees his expression set into one of grim determination.

"Leave," Will insists, pushing at him.

"No," Francis replies. "Not without you."

"Francis!" the woman yells. "Francis, come here, now!"

"Come on, Will," Francis says, and takes his hand, yanking him back towards the door. The Alpha is tugging at the handle, but it won't budge. The lady of the house screams at them, pointing accusingly at Francis and the other Alpha.

"You!" she shrieks, and begins her descent. Will's heart is hammering in his chest, his skin feels cold as ice. He's frozen in fear. In the light of the fire, she looks so much more monstrous, and the house groans around them, shuddering and spluttering with the smoke in its lungs. She lunges down the stairs, prowling towards them faster than Will thought she could move, her arms outstretched and ready to claw them to pieces.

It's hard to see through all the smoke, the fire burning Will down to the bones, thrown up through the floorboards as the house coughs and the basement door opens. Flames rear up like a beast, roaring so loud Will is deafened by them. Francis curses, and grabs Will by the scruff of the neck, hauling him back towards the front door.

"It won't budge!" the other Alpha yells.

She's at the bottom of the stairs, now. Flames lick at her ankles, melting her flesh and burning what remains of her dress to ash. She looks like a demon, some hellish beast of fire and rage, and still, still, looks right at Will. Right through him, her jaws parted and ready to swallow him whole.

She smiles, wide and feral. "You're not going anywhere, you insolent -."

The door to the cellar blows off its hinges as the barrel of brandy explodes, and Will flinches as the door splinters, crashing pieces of fire-drenched wood in every direction. One piece catches him on the shoulder, burning him, and he hisses and flinches back, colliding with Francis' chest. The lady of the house shrieks, turning to look at the new threat, and Will swallows when he sees, from the maw of the cellar, a man standing.

He's not real, not a human man. He is bones and blackened flesh and hollow eyes. If she is the demon, he is the Devil himself. Will swallows, taking another step back, the heat now so stark against his chilled skin that he feels like he's made of fire. It's getting hard to breathe; they're going to suffocate.

The heat makes the curtain rods buckle, one of them crashing down in a wreath of flaming cloth, and the end of it crashes against one of the side windows. The house groans mournfully, nursing its bruised eye, and Will, in a fit of panic that might be called genius, runs forward, out of Francis' reach, and grabs the heavy black box that Randall had used to speak to him.

He turns, and throws it against the cracked glass. It shatters in a perfect circle, wide enough for a hand. The Omega in Francis' group runs to it, shoving at the edges with his laptop, and gestures, yelling wildly for them all to crawl through it.

The woman goes first, then the Omega, then the Alpha. Francis tugs on Will, bringing him to the window, and as Will lifts himself up to crawl through, he feels an icy hand around his ankle, and is yanked back. He lets out a cry of alarm, rolls onto his back, and stares up at the lady of the house as she hisses at him, jaws parted so wide she resembles a snake, her unblinking eyes huge and terrifying in her half-melted face.

"You're not going anywhere -."

The blackened man has come for her, and hauls her back by her dirty hair, skin peeling from her scalp as he yanks her off of Will. Will gasps, scrambling back, his hands and shoulders touching the blackened stone. He hisses, sweating, breathing hard as the blackened man grabs the lady by her neck and throws her to the ground.

He turns to look at Will, and though he has no eyes, and no mouth, Will knows who he is.

He sobs, putting one of his burned hands to his mouth, and Randall turns, crouches down over the lady's writhing form, on fire and melting, and bites down all around her neck, separating her head from her shoulders with a savage tug.

"Will!" Will looks up, sees Francis reaching through the window for him. He grips the man's forearm, and Francis hauls him to his feet and helps him climb out the window as the building sputters, groans, and the doors fly open with a ragged hiss, before slamming shut with all the flames inside.

The windows close their eyes, and the house retreats into itself to quietly implode.

Will gasps, stumbling away from the house, down the stairs and into the soft, green grass beyond it. He shoves Francis off him and tries to stand on his own two feet. The grass tickles his burned soles, stings his skin. The air feels too cold and too warm all at once, heavy on his shoulders.

The sun…. He lifts his eyes to see it, the soft pinks and blues of the setting sky. Hears, in a cluster of trees sitting a few feet away, birds tittering to each other. Feels wind, stroking his face like the caress of a lover, raking fingers through his hair, kissing his cheeks.

He collapses to the ground, on his hands and knees, and buries his fingers in his hair, forehead to the soft, cool dirt, and screams. With relief, with sorrow, with fear. It's a short sound, when all is said and done, for his lungs are full of ash and he doesn't know how to breathe with so much moving air around him. He is whipped up by a storm, the heat of the fire branded into his back, his hands shaking. Hunger, thirst, exhaustion, three months of it all catch up to him at once.

He screams again, tearing at the earth. Sobs, tears too thick and warm to have come from him dripping down his cheeks. His back heaves and he retches, though there is precious little to give from his empty stomach.

He cries, lost in a timeless place of overwhelming emotion, so wide and empty it's like he's entered the house all over again, and then he hears a crunch of frost-covered grass beneath shoes, and sees knees in his periphery as someone kneels down beside him.

A hand cups his chin, and makes him lift his head. Through the tears, he can make out Francis' face.

Francis lets him cry, holds Will as he sobs and buries his face in Francis' chest, clinging to him because Francis feels so warm and alive and smells just enough like Randall to make him ache. A wide, gentle hand pets through his greasy hair, and Will's cries eventually go silent, when he hears Francis purring, weakly, for him.

Francis nuzzles his shoulder, pulling back when Will hisses, jerking at the sting of pressure on the burn. He doesn't offer any shallow condolences, no reassurance. Will has always liked that about him; he is a man of action, just like Randall was.

He doesn't say 'It's alright' or 'You're safe' or 'I'm here, I've got you'. He just cups Will's face, rests their foreheads together, and lets Will soak in the raw, sharp-toothed reality of finally being free.

Will turns his head to one side, to see the other three standing, staring at the burning house. Another window cracks, raining down pieces of glass, and there is the soft discordant cry of many voices, all screaming in relief at being devoured until, one by one, they go silent. The Alpha and Omega are holding hands, the woman has one hand on the Alpha's shoulder, giving a reassuring squeeze.

Finally, Francis stands, and helps Will to his feet. "I don't know about all of you, but I could use some food, a shower, and as much alcohol as we can buy."

The woman turns to them, and offers Will a small, reassuring smile. She approaches them both, one hand out like Will is a skittish dog she's trying to calm. Will takes her hand, shakes it once. "I'm Beverly," she says, and nods to the other two. "That's Jimmy and Brian." Will nods. "You must be Will."

"Yeah," Will rasps, tongue swollen and throat clogged with smoke.

She nods again, slowly, her dark eyes looking Will up and down sympathetically. After another moment, she pulls Will into a tight hug, and Will tenses but lets her do it, and then succumbs to the need for touch, wrapping his arms around her tightly and burying his face in her hair.

"Let's put as much distance between us and this place as possible," Francis suggests gently. He touches Will's arm, and Will pulls away from Beverly, happy enough, for the moment, to let Francis mildly placate him, press soothing, warm fingers to his good shoulder and his hair as Alphas are wont to do with Omegas they are familiar with.

"No argument from me," the Alpha says. He doesn't look at Will, but that's alright. "C'mon, Jimmy."

They have a van, parked nearby. Will follows slowly, unused to walking on grass now, and without fear of being heard and hunted. He jumps at the sound of the van door sliding open, and lets out a shaky, sheepish laugh.

Francis, in answer, says nothing, but lets Will sit with him in the backseat and keeps him pressed up close. Brian, the Alpha, drives, Jimmy in the passenger seat. Beverly sits on Francis' other side and occasionally reaches over Francis' shoulders to play with Will's hair.

Will has no fucking idea what to do. For months, he's dreamed of getting out of that place, of being free. He never thought it would be Francis and his friends who would do it. And now that he's out, it doesn't feel real. His skin is too tight and his lungs are too dry, lacking the pervasive, wet, moldy air. The rumble of the van doesn't sound like rat scratches. The breaths of the living don't sound like the rattle of the lady of the house.

Francis' purr feels so strange against his shoulder. He hasn't heard anything like it since -.

He clenches his eyes tightly shut, new tears welling behind his lids. "I'm sorry," he whispers, and knows all of them are perked up to listen to him. "I'm so, so fucking sorry, Francis."

Francis tilts his head, nuzzling his hair.

"Randall -." He breath hitches, and he wipes at his face. "Randall wanted to go in. I didn't want to, but I went in with him. And then…."

Francis is quiet, for a moment, and then he murmurs, "How did he die?"

"The woman killed him," Will replies. "While I was asleep. I woke up and he was gone, and then I saw what she'd done to him." Francis nods, and rests a gentle hand on Will's knee. "She let him live for a week. I don't know why she didn't kill me too."

"We may never know," Francis murmurs. "But that's alright, Will. You're alive, and you got out. Right now all that matters to me is getting you cleaned up and fed."

"And drunk," Beverly adds with false cheer.

Will shakes his head, looking out of the window. The world is passing by in such a blur. He can see, in the side mirror, the remnants of the house, still going up in flames. The roof collapses, throwing up a huge cloud of smoke and ash. He swallows, and stares at it, wondering, if he looks long enough, if he will see the blackened man – Randall – step from the ashes, prepared to follow them.

But that's impossible. Randall is gone. Forever, truly, this time.

He closes his eyes, turns his face away, and weeps as quietly as he can.

They were staying in a motel, two rooms between them. Brian and Jimmy had one, Beverly and Francis had the other. Twin beds, in theirs. Francis helps Will, limping, into the room, and lets him have the shower, promising that Beverly will remain while he goes to fetch Will something to wear and some ointment and bandages to help with his burns.

Peeling off his clothes feels like taking off a layer of skin. It's so well-caked to Will that it stings when he moves it, and he hisses, letting the dirty clothes drop to the floor. The mirror tells him what he already knew; he's dropped almost half his body weight, there are dark circles under his eyes, his face holding new lines of emotion denoting terror and exhaustion.

His hair is so flat and greasy it's a wonder it hasn't started falling out, and falls almost to the center of his back now. He'll need a haircut, and thanks whatever twist of Omega biology exists that he didn't have to worry about facial hair. Will sighs, and gingerly touches the skin on his shoulder, wincing at the red burn stretched in a mark two inches wide just shy of his collarbone. His hands are burned, too, though not as badly, and his feet feel raw and tender, like the skin might just peel away if he stands in one spot for too long.

He turns on the shower and steps under the spray, so familiar with cold that the sensation doesn't register as uncomfortable. Still, he shivers, closing his eyes and letting the water beat down on him. He flinches when it stings his shoulder, makes his skin ache. There's a folded washcloth, bottles of shampoo and body wash, and he takes the washcloth first, the water turning murky grey as it runs down his body, as he lathers it with body wash and scrubs his skin raw and red.

He scrubs himself down until every inch of him is raw and pink, and lets the washcloth drop, his fingers curling and beginning to tremble in the heat of the shower spray. A sob curls up like an animal trapped in his chest, fluttering frantically against the cage of his ribs. He did not get time to mourn Randall, while he was trapped there, and even now he still feels the insane, impossible notion that Randall will come to him, will appear between the grout and touch his face and lead him to food. His belly aches with a chasmic hunger, a relentless desire to find something sweet and soft and devour it.

His vision blurs, and he presses his knuckles to his teeth, clenching his eyes tightly shut and shuddering around his grief-stricken exhale. Francis will want a funeral for Randall, probably. And that's nothing to say of what has happened to Randall's apartment, or Will's own home since his disappearance. He's worried about his dogs, about stupid shit like mortgages and bills and Randall's landlord is a cranky old bitch who would sooner throw all his shit on the street than listen to the fact that he's dead, and it all seems so Goddamn *pedestrian.*

When one has lived alone with the dead for so long, how the fuck do they go back to the land of the living?

None of it matters. Will can go back to his house and figure out what happened to his dogs – they have open access to the doggie door in the front, so he's sure they would have left by now and scattered to the four winds. Probably picked up as strays, adopted or still in shelters, wondering where he is. If anyone owned that place, they will investigate the cause of the fire. Will might have to face charges for property damage and the idea of putting any more energy towards that accursed building fills him with dread.

He just wants to disappear. Find somewhere quiet and secluded and live there alone. No mate, no boyfriend, no children. Maybe the dogs he can track down again. But Francis won't just let him disappear. He's a good pack Alpha, loyal and loving to a fault. He'll insist on taking care of Will, if he can. Putting him up until he gets back on his feet.

Will doesn't know what it feels like to walk tall in the world anymore. Three months was enough to drag him down to nothing but the concept of survival. He's not fit for civilized company.

He bends down to lather shampoo into his hair, and freezes when a knock comes at the bathroom door. He hears it open. "I got some clothes for you, Will," Francis' voice floats to him above the drum of the water. "And there's food out here. Whenever you're ready."

Francis will want answers. He deserves them, too, which just makes this whole thing so much worse. Will can't just disappear until he's given that.

He sighs, tipping his head back so the shampoo washes out, and turns off the shower, shivering in the comparative chill. Then, he goes tense all over, rubbing his hands up and down his arms when he realizes that he shouldn't be feeling this cold.

Below him, between his feet, the drips of the water begin to grow hard and white with frost.

He shivers, eyes widening when he hears, below the whir of the fan and the shower's drips, a harsh, ragged exhale. A rasping sound, like nails on glass. Every inch of him goes tight and tense with fear, the organs in his chest spasming in terror, because he knows that sound.

He blinks owlishly at the shower curtain, and swallows when he sees a shadow on the other side of it. It's unmoving, but certainly not male. Not Francis. He clears his throat, watching it. Listening to the breathing of the lady of the house.

He stares at her silhouette, trying to will it away. No, it's impossible. The blackened man ate her. Randall ate her, and finished her. She burned with the rest of the house. She can't have possibly followed Will out here. Just like it's impossible for a house to trap someone inside it and it's impossible for the dead to walk amongst the living.

The lady's head turns, and Will knows she is staring right at him. A weak, helpless whimper escapes him before he clamps a hand over his mouth, shuddering in fear. His knees give out and he sinks to his heels in the tub, clenching his eyes tightly shut, covering his ears.

She can't see him. She doesn't know he's here. He's invisible. She can't find him. She can't hurt him.

A single step. Heels clicking on the floor. Will shakes his head and whines as quietly as he can. He opens his eyes, looks up to see her long, clawed hand reaching out, stretched too far and too thin for something living. Black claws curl around the edge of the shower curtain, ready to haul it back, ready to expose and devour him.

"Francis!" he yells frantically. "*Francis!*"

The shower curtain is flung back and Will gasps, looking up to see the Alpha standing over him, his eyes threaded with red in response to Will's fearful call. He crouches down and takes Will's hands from his head, holding them both. Will is shivering, and feels frozen stiff. "What's wrong? Are you okay?" Francis asks worriedly.

Will shakes his head, wrenching his hands back, and buries his face in them. He takes in a slow, uneven breath.

Francis pets through his hair, shushing him, and Will flinches at the warm, dry caress of a towel as Francis wraps it around his shoulders. He helps Will up and out of the tub, wrapping him up in the over-large towel. He smells warm, alive, like copper and fast food, and Will buries his face in Francis' chest and tries to get control of his breathing.

"You're alright," Francis murmurs, petting his wet hair from his face.

But no, Will is pretty fucking far from alright. He'll never be alright again. He pushes himself away and clings to the towel, holding it tight around his body to shield his nakedness from Francis' eyes. He breathes out. "Sorry," he says weakly. "Got a little spooked. I'm okay."

Francis nods, his eyes dark with worry. He leaves the door cracked without Will asking him to. Will shudders, drying himself off quickly, and dresses in the clothes Francis left him; a pair of sweatpants that are a little too long in the leg, and a large hoodie that swamps his starved-down frame. But it smells like Francis, and that's somewhat soothing.

There's a spare toothbrush in the packaging and a tube of toothpaste on the sink. Will brushes his teeth four times before his mouth feels clean, rinses with water, and comes out of the bathroom, shutting off the light.

Jimmy, Brian, and Beverly are all in the hotel room, and look up from a small table when he emerges. There's a hoard of fast food in front of them, burgers and fries and sauces, all of it so greasy-smelling and thick with salt, it makes Will's stomach clench.

Beverly smiles at him, and offers him a plain burger wrapped in foil, and Will takes it with a grateful nod, unwrapping it and biting down. A bottle of water is her second offering, and he washes the food down with a gasp, draining the bottle. He drains the second one she gives him, too.

He sits on the bed, and waits for their inevitable questions.

They are silent, content to eat for a moment, and then after a while, Jimmy stands, the other Omega coming to sit by Will. His scent is sweet and calming; honey-milk and caramel. Will breathes it in eagerly, wanting to rid his mouth of the taste of death and the overly-salty burger.

"Want one?" he asks, offering a pack of fries. Will wrinkles his nose and shakes his head apologetically, and Jimmy laughs. "Yeah, figure your stomach is probably going to need gentle treatment for a while. Soups, salads, all that shit."

Will blinks at him and Jimmy shrugs. "My mom had surgery a while back. After she woke up her stomach was so messed up she couldn't even handle Jell-O. It'll get itself back to normal after a while."

Will nods, pressing his lips together, and looks down at his feet.

Brian huffs, drumming his knuckles against the side of the table. "So are we going to ignore the fact that we all just barely escaped from a haunted house with a demon lady that tried to kill us?" he snaps. Will winces, nursing his third bottle of water.

"Christ's sake, man, let him have a minute," Francis snaps. He's sitting opposite Brian, near Beverly, and she touches his shoulder in a soothing pat to calm him down. The two Alphas glare at each other, but Francis is obviously the leader, and Brian backs down after another second. Francis turns to look at Will. "But…if you're willing to talk…."

"There's not much to say," Will rasps, and clears his throat. Jimmy nudges him, warm and solid next to him, and Will still feels so cold. "You guys saw it." He frowns at Francis. "Why the Hell were you even there in the first place?"

"Randall told me he was going to bring you there," Francis replies. "When you guys didn't show up to our dad's birthday, I went looking. No one had seen you for months, no one knew where you were. I remembered him mentioning that place."

Will nods. "I didn't want to go in," he murmurs, not at all ashamed at showing fear. "He said fifteen minutes. We could leave if I wanted to after fifteen minutes. And then…" He sighs, and shrugs helplessly, taking another drink. His stomach is cramping with so much liquid introduced, and he winces and forces himself to eat more of the burger.

"You were trapped," Beverly murmurs. "Like we were."

Will nods.

"There were others," Jimmy says, and Will looks at him. "Two other ghosts showed up, to help us, when we were in the kitchens."

"There were more than two," Will says. "Dozens. They all…" He shudders, breathing in raggedly, and stares down at his feet. His toes are pale, they look like those of a corpse, and he curls them and buries them in the ugly green carpeting. "They were all in the basement. That's where the bodies ended up. That's where…I found Randall, after."

Francis swallows, and looks away. Closes his eyes.

"How did it happen?" he whispers.

"The woman killed him," Will says, just as softly. Francis asked him the same question in the car, but Will can understand how impossible it all seems, can understand the need to hear it again. "I think she killed all of them. They were all afraid of her."

"So what *was* she?" Beverly whispers. "She wasn't like the other ghosts."

Will shakes his head, and looks to the bathroom. The cracked door with its thin line of blackness is starting to bother him, and he rises, and pulls it all the way closed. He shivers, and rests his forehead against it, almost expecting to hear the scratch of rats or her rasping breaths on the other side.

"You said she let him live," Francis says, and Will turns to look at him. "For a while, at least. What happened?"

Will shakes his head, lets out a helpless sound. "I don't know."

"Why did she let *you* live?"

"I don't know!" Will hisses, and whirls on them, tears stinging his eyes. "I don't *know*, okay? I don't fucking -."

He stops, rubbing a hand forcefully over his mouth until his teeth ache. He shakes his head vehemently, his entire body trembling. The bathroom feels like there's a cold breeze running through it, stinging his feet, and he paces away from it, helpless and jittery and at a total loss of how to reconcile the fact that he's free, he's out.

She can't hurt him anymore. It's all in his head; it must be. PTSD or something like that.

Jimmy makes a quiet sound, drawing their attention. He looks up from his phone. "The fire's in the news," he says, turning it over to Beverly when she holds out her hand. "Police are asking for witnesses."

Will swallows. "I'll claim fault," he replies. It was his fault, after all. "No one needs to know about your involvement. I'll turn myself in and you can all forget about it."

Francis stares at him, and shakes his head. "Will -."

"You guys rescued me," Will says before he can continue. "You got me out, and I'll be in your debt for that for the rest of my life. Really, I can't thank you enough. I never will be able to, but there's no need for you to stick around and get in trouble for something that wasn't your fault. You need to put yourselves as far away from that place as you can."

Francis shakes his head again. "They're going to find bodies, Will," he replies. "Skeletons, and not all of them will be before you got there. You need someone to vouch for your whereabouts before they put you away for multiple murders."

Will barks a harsh laugh. "What are you going to say? A ghost lady killed all those people? No one will believe you." He runs his hands through his wet hair, fingers shaking. "No. It's fine. I don't – there's nothing out there for me, now. I don't care what -."

"Damn it, Will," Francis snarls, and stands. "I didn't lose my brother and almost get my pack killed just so you can rot away behind bars for the rest of your fucking life!"

Will freezes in place, flinching at the sound of Francis' yell. Francis isn't mated, doesn't have a Voice that can make Will do what he's told, but still it snaps across the back of his neck like

a hand. He swallows, and looks away, trembling in place. Francis gentles immediately, and tries to go to him, but Will takes a step back before he can touch.

Beverly stands, and puts herself between them, but turns to look at Will. "We have proof," she says gently. "My camera, and Jimmy's laptop. We have videos of what happened in there."

Will shakes his head, and frowns. Fuck, yes, if the police find equipment in there they'll know it wasn't just Will. He can't take all the blame for himself if they find any evidence that there were others in the house. Maybe the fire destroyed it all, but he can't take that chance.

Torn with indecision and frozen in place, Francis takes advantage and approaches Will, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. "You're family," he says gently, and Will sighs, shoulders sagging in resignation. "I'm not abandoning you."

He sounds like Randall when he says that. Will presses his lips together, and sighs again.

"Now come on. You look like you haven't slept in months and I could use some myself." Jimmy stands from one of the beds and Francis leads Will to it, watching as he settles. The sky is dark outside. The rest of them finish their meal and pack up, Brian and Jimmy leaving for the other room and Beverly going to the bathroom to perform her nightly routine.

Will curls up on his side, facing the window, as tight a ball as he can make himself. He listens to Beverly finish and Francis swap out with her, and turns when he feels the blankets pulled back. Beverly grins at him. "Mind sharing? Francis is huge and I'm not about to try sharing with him."

Will huffs a laugh, but moves so that there's room for her. It's a tight fit and he has to stretch out to accommodate her shoulders, but he rolls onto his side again and pulls the blankets tight around his body. The mattress is so soft, the pillows smell clean, the duvet is warm. It's a novel sensation. He closes his eyes to the sound of the bathroom fan and Francis taking a shower.

The only reason Will knows he wakes up at four thirty-two that morning is because the alarm clock with its blaring red lights crackles so loudly and suddenly that it wakes him. He sits up, breathing hard, shaking, and watches the lights blink, flicker, and abruptly cut out.

He's shivering, his breath misting in the cold, and trembles underneath his blankets. He feels frozen to the bone, and fear grips him tightly by the back of the neck. He has lived enough, experienced enough in the land of the dead, to know a natural cold from an unnatural one.

This is not a natural cold.

Behind him, silent except for a single 'click', the bathroom door opens.

Will surges upright, stumbling to his feet, searching for a weapon. The fissure created in the open bathroom door is blacker than black, like light goes there to be swallowed whole. Still, within it, impossible, he sees the gleam of bleached-white teeth. Sees long, black claws curl around the edges of the door and slowly pry it open.

His heart is hammering in his chest and he stands, frozen, panting, watching as the door slides open. He can't bring himself to move; his feet and legs are made of ice, his hands bound and stiff. His lungs feel as though encased in glass, bones heavy as lead.

The door creaks open all the way. The hand disappears, and then flattens on the frame. Clawed, sinking in. A second hand presses to the other side, and the bathroom light flickers like a burst cheap bulb, revealing a silhouette of a woman, all skeletal and melted flesh.

Will recoils from it, his back hitting the wall of the hotel room. He can't bring himself to scream, can barely breathe. He watches as a foot melts from the darkness, still in those heels. They make no sound on the carpet, but he can hear them in his head, loud, echoing.

The rest of the woman's body melts from the darkness, and she stands tall, seems gargantuan and monumental in the darkness. Will's heart feels like it's in his throat, trying to escape. Her eyes, wide and unlidded and wild, meet his, and she parts her jaws and though no sound comes out, Will hears a scream inside his head.

He covers his ears, though it does nothing, and shakes his head vehemently. It's all in his head. This is just a dream, a bad dream, and he'll wake up and nothing will have happened.

The woman turns from him, her eyes landing on Francis' sleeping body. She snarls, her lower jaw unhinged like that of a serpent, and advances on him.

"No!" Will yells, and puts himself between them. "Don't fucking touch him. Get away!"

One of her clawed hands snaps out, wrapping around his throat. Will chokes from the pressure on his neck, kicking at her, but her arm is too long, unnaturally so, and he can't make contact. He claws at her arm and peels flesh from her bones but her grip doesn't falter for a second.

She glares at him, snarling loudly in his head, and yanks him to her, her jaws parted to reveal sharp fangs, and turns her head, sets her teeth to his rabbiting pulse -.

The light comes on, and she disappears, and Will falls to his hands and knees, coughing and pawing at his aching throat. "Will!" Francis rises, and kneels down beside him, taking his face in hand. There's saliva on Will's neck, or maybe it's just sweat, and his throat is so sore he can't speak. "Will, are you okay?"

The cold recedes slower than the tide, and Will trembles. A whimper bubbles up from his chest, burst air given room to expand, and he heaves, retching and coughing up what little he managed to eat into a slick pile between his knees. Francis' scent is sour with concern, and he pets over Will's back. Will hears Beverly waking up, a soft gasp escaping her when she sees them on the ground.

"What happened?" she demands, rising and kneeling on Will's other side. Too close, too warm.

Will flings himself away from their touch, rises to his feet and whirls on them. "She was here," he rasps, throat so tender, crushed to pieces. Francis blinks at him and Will gestures to the bathroom. "She was here. She was going to…"

Francis follows his gaze to the bathroom. He presses his lips together, stands, and turns on the light. He looks back to Will. "There's no one here," he says gently. Too gentle, like Will is some beaten and abused animal.

Will rubs at his throat. There are no claw marks he can feel in his skin. No tender, warm bruising. If he didn't know better, if he was a stronger man, maybe he could convince himself it was all in his head, but no, that's impossible. He knows what he felt. He knows fear. He can't fake fear like that.

"I have to go," Will tells him frantically. "I have to put as much distance between us as possible. She's going to kill you, Francis."

"Will," Francis sighs, and shakes his head. "There's no one here. Just us."

Will snarls at him. "How can you not believe me?" he demands. "You saw her. Didn't you?"

Francis shakes his head, running a hand through his hair. "I don't doubt what I saw in that house," he replies. "But we're not there anymore, Will. We're free. We burned it all to the ground. There's no way she could follow us out here."

"She's inside me," Will insists, clutching at his stomach. "She'll follow me. I have to get away from you before she hurts you." He can tell Francis is in no mood to listen, and he growls, turning away. "I can't keep you safe. I promised Randall I would protect you and the only way to do that is -."

A knock comes at the door. Will tenses, and Francis frowns. "Who on Earth…?"

"Francis Dolarhyde," a voice comes. Powerful, male. Older. "Open up. This is Agent Crawford with the FBI. We'd like to ask you a few questions."

Francis' frown deepens, and he looks to Will, who gives a helpless shrug in return. Francis helps Beverly to her feet and goes to the door, opening it to reveal a broad-shouldered, dark-skinned Alpha, who greets him with a nod and a serious disposition.

"Good morning, Agent," Francis says. "How can I help you?"

The man, Crawford, flashes his badge. "Hello, Mister Dolarhyde. Do you have a moment?" His eyes move from Francis, looking over Will and Beverly. His brows rise. "Did I interrupt something?"

Will flinches. He's sure he looks more like a kidnapping victim than a friend at this point. He holds Beverly's hand, hoping to communicate that, of all the crimes he and Francis might be guilty of, he is no hostage. Alphas can get weird when they see an Omega in distress.

"Of course, Agent," Francis replies, and gestures for him to come in. Crawford does, and gives Beverly and Will a polite nod. There are other agents outside, though not many. "How can I help you?"

"There's been an incident on a property not far from here," Crawford says. He wanders the room almost idly, and Will watches him note the rumpled sheets, the stain of sweat Will left behind where he slept. Sees him rake over Will, taking in his state of distress, as well as Beverly's worried demeanor. "The cameras stationed at the entrance of the property show a vehicle matching yours outside, leaving the premises around the time of the incident."

He's being deliberately non-specific about what the 'incident' was. Classic tactic, waiting for Francis to implicate himself. He turns, and fixes Francis will a raised brow. "You wouldn't happen to know anything about that, would you?"

It's clear he expects Francis to deny any involvement. Before Francis can answer, Will clears his throat, drawing the man's attention. "I started the fire," he confesses. The man blinks at him. "I brought my friends up to see the place, thought it would be cool to see some ghosts or whatever." He shrugs, taking on the mantle of degenerate youth easily. Even manages a guilty smile. "It was an accident. But I'm the one who started it."

"You did," Crawford says, brows lifting again. "And you are…?"

"Will Graham," Will says.

Crawford's brows draw down, and he frowns. "Graham," he repeats. His head tilts.

"Will didn't do anything," Francis argues. "I started the fire. Not him."

Will glares at him, letting out a warning growl. "No you didn't," he hisses.

Crawford sighs. "Alright. Well, regardless, I'm going to need you to come down to the station. All three of you," he adds, nodding to Beverly. "We'll need statements."

Francis sighs, and nods, and through the door Jimmy and Brian spill in, frantic and breathing hard. "Francis, there are cops out -. Oh." Brian falls silent, and Will sighs, shaking his head in defeat. Fucking pack Alphas.

Crawford smiles. "Gentlemen," he greets. "I suppose you won't mind coming down to the station as well to give your statements." They huff, shoulders dropping, but nod. "Should I be expecting any more of your compatriots?"

"No, Sir," Francis replies, shaking his head. "It's just us."

"Alright then. Get dressed and come with me, if you would."

Chapter 4

Will has been in an interrogation room exactly one other time in his life. He had been held there while they investigated his father's death before ruling him out for murder. A simple misunderstanding, since Will was the one who found him and stupidly contaminated the crime scene before calling the police. He can still remember his father's body, throat torn out, lying there in the middle of their living room.

They'd cleared him, because Will had been innocent. Pinned it on a guy who felt that his father's apparently sub-par work on his boat should be resolved the old-fashioned way. He's been in jail since, as far as Will knows.

He looks up as Agent Crawford enters with a glass of water. He sets it down in front of Will and Will takes a drink, gives a grateful nod, and settles as the Alpha does. He sighs, heavily, and opens a file in front of Will, gesturing to the camera that's recording them.

"You've been read your rights?" he asks.

"Yes, Sir," Will replies, nodding.

The Alpha nods as well. "And you're refusing your right to an attorney?"

"Yes, Sir," Will says again. "I set the fire."

Crawford looks at him for a moment, his lips pursing, and he sits back in his chair. "I've done a little research on you, Will," he says, and Will tilts his head, forcing himself to remain calm. "I knew I recognized your name. Found the old case with your father." Will swallows, and nods again.

"Then you know I was acquitted."

"Of course," Crawford says with a wave of his hand. "And since then, you kept your head low. Moved out of state, got a job teaching, lived alone." He pauses. "Had a boyfriend. Your friend's brother, so he tells me." Will nods. "And then three months ago you disappeared. With him."

Will looks down, his fingers curling around his water glass. "Yes, Sir," he replies.

"No one's seen hide nor hair of you since then," Crawford continues. "It paints an interesting picture. I've interviewed all your friends; you're the last." Will breathes out, swallows harshly. "Their stories all line up; Francis went looking for you at that estate. Found you. Then someone set a fire and you all high-tailed it out of there."

Will nods. "That's pretty much it, yes."

"Ah, but you see, there's this big three-month hole in their stories," Crawford continues. He sits forward, fingers laced on the table. Will doesn't shy back; he's not afraid of Alphas.

There's nothing the living can do to him that is worse than the dead. He meets Crawford's eyes as steadily as he can, fighting down the natural Omega instinct to avert his gaze. "I'm hoping you can fill me in."

Will swallows, looking down at Crawford's hands. He takes another drink. "My boyfriend's name was Randall Tier," he says. "He was Francis' half-brother. Different mothers. He wanted to show me the house. We went in, and I was trapped there for three months until Francis came for me."

Crawford eyes him, and sighs through his nose. "See, that's where it all becomes a little strange for me," he says, and gestures to the file in front of him. "I have no idea how you managed to survive in that place for three months."

Will huffs. "It wasn't easy."

"You certainly show signs of malnourishment, I'm sure a physical would confirm your story. I've seen pictures of you before that time, so unless there's a new diet fad I'm not aware of, I have no reason not to believe you. Except when it comes to ghosts."

Will huffs again.

"Everyone and their mother knows the legends of that place. I'm not exactly a cynic myself, but the idea that ghosts were keeping you trapped in there and tried to kill all of you is a little far-fetched, I'm sure you can agree."

"Regardless, it's the truth," Will replies. "I started the fire so that we could all escape."

"If a fire was all you needed, why didn't you do it before?"

Will manages a wry smile. "I didn't have a lighter."

Crawford's eyes narrow. "The groundskeeper swears there was no one living in that house," he says.

"He never noticed me," Will replies. "I tried to get his attention at first, but every time I did, the windows went dark. He never heard me." He shakes his head. "I tried. Every door was locked, I couldn't break them down."

Crawford hums. Then, he opens the file, and Will blinks, eyes widening, looking at the rows and rows of photographs of the bodies. All of them, blackened and burned to a crisp, their mouths opened wide in screams, the few that still had flesh melted into puddles around them.

"This," he says, and points to a photo of a single body, "is the most recent one according the M.E.. We're running tests, but would I be correct in assuming this is Randall Tier?"

Will swallows, his eyes burning with grief. "Yes," he whispers.

"And do you think I'll find his time of death to be in the last three months?"

Will's fingers curl, and he swallows again. "Yes."

Crawford hums. "And you're going to tell me the ghosts did it, is that right?"

"It's true," Will replies. "She killed him. The lady of the house."

Crawford stares at him, and then looks down at the photos. "That's what Dolarhyde said, too," he murmurs. "Thing is, I'm not sure that's going to hold up in court, Will. If you were the only one in that house, then you're the only one that could have killed him."

"I didn't," Will insists, shaking his head. "I didn't kill him."

"The jury isn't going to believe that, Will," Crawford says. His voice is gentle, but stern. "Especially with your record. A good lawyer will insist bodies have a habit of turning up around you. They'll pull your case history and might even manage to line up other bodies with your presence there."

Will shakes his head, his breathing shallow, unsteady.

"So you can see where my problem lies."

Will nods, forcing himself to remain calm. He meets Crawford's eyes again. "Whatever you need from me, I'll do it," he says, and the man blinks at him in surprise. "DNA, blood samples, fucking Voice me if you have to. I'll take polygraphs, psych evals, I don't care. But I didn't kill him."

Crawford's head tilts.

"Then who did?" he murmurs. "And who killed the rest of them?"

"The lady of the house," Will insists. "I told you."

"And who is she?"

"I -." Will swallows, shakes his head. "I don't know."

Crawford watches him for another moment, before he sighs, and gathers the photos, closing the file. "The man who owns the property wants to speak with you," he says. "If he presses charges, I can hold you for arson until we get the homicide charges cleared up. Since you so graciously offered, I'll be taking samples of your blood, hair, and skin, just so that we have it on hand."

Will nods. "I understand." He looks up. "And the others?"

"You're more interesting to me than they are at the moment," Crawford tells him. "You certainly seem more honest. I'll be advising them not to leave the state, but for now they're free to go."

Will breathes out a sigh of relief, shoulders dropping. "Good."

Crawford stares at him for another moment, and then leans forward, voice lowered; "Will." Will blinks at him, frowning. "I'm going to ask you this once, and I hope you will do me the

courtesy of answering honestly. Off the record, if you want." Will's frown deepens. "You're not being coerced, are you? Neither of the Alphas in your group are making you confess to things or say things under duress."

Will can't help it; he laughs. "No, Agent Crawford," he says, unable to hide the mirth from his voice. "I am of sound mind and relatively sound body. Everything I've told you has been honest and under my own will."

Crawford nods, and stands. "Wait here while I bring the owner," he says. Will nods, and takes another drink as the door closes behind him.

Will waits, on edge. He's cuffed loosely to the table so he can't get up and pace as he normally does when he's stressed out, so his legs jog anxiously below the table. He hopes Francis and the others are alright. He hopes Francis isn't too angry with him, that he insisted he was the one who started the fire.

It wouldn't have been right, to put Francis away for a crime he didn't commit. Francis didn't get trapped in there for any reason except Will and Randall, and Will couldn't live with himself if he served jail time because of some stupid, reckless bid for freedom. Even if it was successful, Will could have killed them all. They might have all been swallowed by the flames if the house hadn't coughed them up.

He's lost in his thoughts, and then freezes when he hears high heels clicking on the floor outside. His breath catches, his eyes wide as he looks at the door, every part of him frozen and tense as he listens to the sound of a woman approaching. It's too quick to be *her*, and the air is far from cold enough, but that means nothing to his animal brain, that has become so used to associating the sound with pain and fear and threat of death.

He can't stay calm. Sweat pricks under his arms, behind his knees. He tugs at the cuffs around his wrists until they bite into his skin, he tries to stand, to get away, but all he manages is an awkward half-crouch, growling and yanking on the cuffs futilely.

Then, the door opens, and Crawford steps in. Behind him is a man in a wheelchair, his face a patchwork of old scars, half his nose missing, glasses taped to his ears so they don't fall. He's being pushed by a hulking brute of a man, wearing medical scrubs.

Behind him come two women, the source of the sound. They are so unrepentantly alive. Will settles, trying to calm his breathing, soothe his racing heart. They are both impeccably dressed, one woman slightly taller though that could just be because of her heels, which look like they would be more at home at a fashion event than in a police interrogation room. That woman has bottle-green eyes and russet colored hair, pulled back into a ponytail, her dark makeup and red lipstick giving her a femme fatale look. The second woman is dressed more conservatively, business professional, her hair hanging in loose, dark waves around her pale face.

"Will," Crawford says, "this is Mason Verger, and his caretaker, Cordell. His sister, Margot Verger, and Doctor Bloom." He gestures to each of them in turn. Will swallows as Mason, from his chair, fixes Will with steely ice-grey eyes, his scarred lips twitching in a rather vicious smile.

"So," Mason says, high-pitched and nasal. "You're the one who burned down my house."

Will swallows, and dips his head, his fingers curling nervously. "Yes, Sir."

"Wouldn't have guessed an Omega for arson, but stranger things have happened, I suppose," Mason says, and gestures vaguely from his seat. To what, Will doesn't know. He seems like the kind of man who moves just so that no one forgets to pay attention to him. "What do you think, Margot? Should we tell this nice Agent to throw him into a hole and never let him out?"

Margot glares at her brother from behind his shoulder, her mouth thinned out and turned down at the corners.

Will sighs, and opens his hands in surrender. "If that's what you want to do," he murmurs.

Doctor Bloom's head tilts, her brow creasing in the middle. She steps forward and pulls out the chair Crawford used, partially blocking Will's sight from Mason. Will blinks at her, swallowing when she settles, folding her hands on the table, and fixes him with an earnest look.

"Will," she says kindly. "How are you feeling?"

Will tilts his head.

"Doctor Bloom is a specialist," Crawford explains.

Will blinks at her. "In what field, Doctor?"

"Abnormal Omega psychology," Bloom replies. "And please, call me Alana."

Will presses his lips together, sighing through his nose. He shakes his head. "I'm not suffering from any trauma," he says. "At least, not about this. I started the fire. I know I caused a lot of damage. I'm more than willing to submit to the full extent of the law in payment for that price."

Alana tilts her head. "Why?" she asks.

Will frowns at her. "Because it's the law," he says.

"No, I mean, why did you start the fire?"

Will stares at her. She seems so incredibly earnest, her eyes gentle, her scent mild. A mother coaxing her child not to fear the monsters under the bed. His heart calms, in her presence. She seems like a kind soul.

"Because I had to," Will finally says. He doesn't know how much they know of the backstory, and doesn't particularly want to have more people laughing at him for believing in ghosts, but it's the truth. The fire set them free. There's something poetic in that.

Alana nods, once, and smiles at him. "Thank you, Will," she says, and stands. She goes to Margot and whispers something in her ear, and Margot blinks at her, and nods. She bends down to relay whatever Alana said to Mason.

Mason scoffs, pushing her away. "Jack, I'll cut to the chase," he says, gesturing to Crawford. "I have no interest in pressing charges. Will here did us all a favor, and frankly I doubt he has enough money to even be worth suing."

Jack frowns at him, but nods.

"However," Mason adds, holding up a finger for silence. "There is the question of, as Will himself said, payment for the price." He smiles at Will, far too wide and not at all comforting. "I understand there's the question of a murder charge as well. Delightful, knowing he's Omega." He turns his head and cranes his chin up to meet Jack's eyes. "I understand you do not want him leaving the area for a while."

"That would be ideal, yes," Jack replies.

"Then I propose an arrangement," Mason crows. "I will be able to form an estimate of the damages by the end of the day. Including room and board, until a time comes when he is taken to jail or acquitted, I suggest Will come work for me to pay off his debt."

Will lets out a shocked breath, his eyes wide. He looks to Alana and finds her smiling kindly at him.

"It's a rather neat arrangement," Mason continues. "He'll be under constant surveillance, and we already have Doctor Bloom on staff for his evaluations, and Cordell here can perform any DNA extraction you might need. If he's guilty, we'll work out the debt settlement some other way, and if he's not, he will work for me until his debt is paid off." Mason smiles. "What say you?"

Jack hums, considering. "I'll need to see a contract and statement confirming it," he says. "From both you, and Will. Signed with witnesses."

"Of course, of course," Mason says with a dismissive wave of his hand. "I can have that for you in an hour."

"And there's the question of Will's guardianship," Jack adds. Will winces, stifling his growl. "Someone needs to accept legal responsibility for him, since his mate and kin are all deceased."

"I'll do it," Alana says, and Will blinks at her in surprise.

"I'll co-sign," Margot adds with a nod.

Jack nods. "That'll need to be included in the contract, and you'll both need to sign for it, ladies."

"That's no problem," Margot replies with another smile. "I'm no stranger to our lawyer's office."

Mason laughs, cutting, like this is a particularly amusing inside joke. Margot presses her lips together, and Jack turns to Will. "Are you willing to do that?" he asks. "We'll be continuing the investigation, of course, and depending on what we find, we may call on you again. But if you want to consult with a lawyer beforehand, you are within your rights to do so."

Will presses his lips together, and looks down at his hands. Of all the possible outcomes he's been faced with, death or jail, he didn't expect indentured servitude to be one of them. He meets Alana's eyes, and while there is nothing overly emotional on her face, her smile is encouraging.

And he did promise to do whatever it took to prove his innocence.

"I agree to those terms," he says, and Mason grins, delighted. Will doesn’t like the look of it, but after what he's been through, an Alpha that's a little too leery doesn't even crest the top five worst situations he's been in. And it's not like he can do much in a wheelchair. Will doubts he has a Voice.

"Excellent," Mason says, smug and smirking. "I'll have the contracts drawn up, and we can all have them signed and notarized at the estate tomorrow."

Jack nods. "I'll bring Will over," he promises.

Mason grins, and Cordell wheels him out. Margot and Jack follow, leaving him and Alana alone. Alana gives him an affectionate smile, and another encouraging nod. "You did the right thing," she says.

"I hope so," Will replies. He presses his lips together, and adds; "Thank you."

"I believe in doing what's right," Alana says. "I don't know what happened to you in there, but the answer isn't a cage."

Will huffs a wry laugh. "Well, I hope for your sake that the courts find me innocent. It won't look good on your record to be a guardian of a murderer."

She smiles. "Well…" She tilts her head. "Are you a murderer?"

"No," Will says.

"I believe you." She nods to him. "I'll see you tomorrow." Will manages a weak smile, and watches her leave. The sound of hers and Margot's heels on the floor make him shake, an aftershock of nervousness skittering up his spine. He hopes he grows used to it, and that, eventually, he can associate the sound with her, and her scent, and not that of the lady of the house.

Will spends the night in a holding cell, separate from the other drunk tank residents and criminals that are being held overnight for whatever charges while they await bail or a court date. As an Omega, he's kept away from everyone else – Mason Verger hadn't been wrong. Omegas are not exactly known as violent offenders, or offenders in general. They keep their heads down and navigate the world carefully because that's what it takes to survive in a world run by Alphas.

Randall and his family had been a welcome change of pace from that. Randall came from money, he and his brother could have easily become those entitled, rich-bred Alphas who believed they owned the world, but he never treated Will as anything lesser because of his status or his breed. He has always been so kind, so patient, so light-hearted, as though the worries of the world would never touch him.

Will can't rest, can't sleep. He's sure that if he closes his eyes, if he blinks for just a moment too long, he will be back in that house and this will all have been some weird fever dream. Or, perhaps worse, she will come to visit him again. She'll come because there are Alphas here and she hates Alphas, she'll hate Will for bringing them to her, she'll -.

He stops, mid-pace, hearing measured footsteps approach from the far end of the hallway, where the rest of the station sits. There comes to him the scent of an Alpha, familiar in an ancient and vague kind of way, like the scent of oceans or fish might throw him back to his adolescence.

He turns when the man comes into view. He's taller than Will, stands straight like he was cut out from a mold and hasn't quite figured out how to slouch yet. He's wearing a suit that probably costs more money than Will has ever had in his life, the color of it black with fine red checkering that highlights the Alpha color in his eyes. He has a sharp-featured face, though at the same time it seems surprisingly soft, like clay used to gentle the severity of a predator's bone structure. Make the wildcat look more like a kitten.

The man meets his eyes, and Will immediately drops his, unable to hold eye contact. His shoulders curl in, drop low, his fingers twitch and he stops them moving to cover his belly. This man, whoever he is, has the demeanor and bearing of someone Will would do well not to cross.

He clears his throat, wets his lips. "Hello," he greets.

The man smiles at him, in a way that shows more in his eyes, a subtle gentling in the lines around his mouth. He turns his head and a guard approaches him, holding out a folding chair. He thanks the guard quietly, unfolds the chair, and sits with a sigh. Will blinks at him, shifting his weight awkwardly, watches the man unbutton his suit jacket and settle himself on his chair. He looks more human, now.

"Good evening, Mister Graham," the Alpha murmurs. His voice is low, accented. "My name is Hannibal Lecter. I'm a doctor." His smile widens when Will doesn't move, and he gestures

to the cot they gave Will for a bed. "Please, have a seat if you'd be more comfortable."

Will does, stepping back and sitting down, wary of putting his back to the Alpha. "Am I getting an exam?" he asks.

"Of a sort," Hannibal replies with another nod. "I'm a psychiatrist, not a physician by trade, anymore, so you needn't worry about anything physically invasive." Will's brow furrows. He's not sure how to take Hannibal specifying the 'physical' distinction. "I'm here to perform an evaluation on you."

Will's frown deepens. "I thought Doctor Bloom was going to be evaluating me," he replies, tilting his head to one side. Hannibal mimics him, and Will's fingers drum along the edge of his bed, settle on either side of his thighs. "After I get out of here; signed, sealed, delivered."

"She will be performing routine monitoring and provide counsel during your contracted service, yes," Hannibal concedes. He seems more amused than anything else by Will's comment. "Agent Crawford asked for my opinion, before you signed anything."

"Why?" Will asks. He can't bring himself to lift his gaze any higher than Hannibal's tie. Black, with very faint, shimmering flecks of gold. Omega colors. He presses his lips together. Omegas are settled by gold, and blue, since gold is a shared color amongst their breed and blue has been known to provoke feelings of trust and calm. He wonders if Hannibal chose the tie on purpose, knowing he was going to meet Will today.

Hannibal pets over his tie – he noticed Will staring. Will flushes and looks away. "You may not fully grasp how unique your situation is, Will. You are on the line for arson, and at least one count of murder. On top of that, you have a pack of people related to the man the police would call your victim, swearing up and down that they had been all trapped and terrorized by ghosts." He sits forward and Will looks back at him, caught in his dark gaze.

He clears his throat again. "I'm not crazy," he says. "And I'm not a murderer."

Hannibal smiles. "I never said you were."

"But you think I am, don't you?" Will demands, eyes dropping, upper lip twitching back in a brief snarl.

"The way I see it," Hannibal begins, sitting back again; "There are four options. The first, that you are, indeed, a mass murderer, and upon risk of discovery tried to burn your trophies and rigged some elaborate ruse to trick your friends. The second option is that, in a fit of hysteria, a veritable *folie à cinq*, you all fell victim to a shared delusion and set the fire with the impression that it would free you, and the bodies are a coincidence. The third possibility is that you are all conspiring together, but I find that conclusion lazy and altogether uninteresting."

Will swallows harshly. "And the fourth option?"

"That you are innocent, and that whatever happened to you in that house, you did what you had to in order to escape or appease your abuser."

Will blinks, and frowns down at his hands. "That last option sounds the most reasonable," he says slowly, "but it doesn't explicitly tell me you believe in ghosts. By that logic, a good lawyer could twist it to say I killed all of them because someone made me."

Hannibal smiles. "That conclusion aggravates you."

"Just because I'm Omega means I'm not capable of violence?" Will spits. He quiets, immediately, seeing the intrigued light in Hannibal's eyes, and turns away, huffing. "I didn't kill anyone, under duress or otherwise. And I'm not crazy."

Hannibal's head tilts, a smooth motion that draws Will's eye again. "If you didn't kill any of those people," he says quietly, "then who did?"

"I'm thinking the FBI will be trying to figure that out," Will replies. "I have no connection to any of them except the most recent one. I didn't kill him – they'll be able to tell that if the M.E. is good at their job."

"How do you figure?"

"My teeth marks won't match, for starters," Will replies. "Randall's lower jaw was completely ripped out. She did it. No human can open their mouth that wide, and if they get a dental imprint from me, they won't be able to make it match."

"You sound like you've put a lot of thought into this," Hannibal notes.

Will looks at him, arching a brow. "I've had a lot of time to myself," he replies. "All I get to do is think."

Hannibal smiles, sitting back in his chair. "How did you survive, in there?" he asks. "What did you eat?"

"Rats, mostly," Will replies, and smiles when Hannibal's mouth turns down in a sympathetic frown. "Bugs when I could find them. It's amazing what a body can choose to survive on."

"Yes," Hannibal concedes. "Truly, we are remarkable as a species, if only for our dogged determination to survive." His head tilts again. "You were trapped in there for three months, according to the shared timeline between you and your friends." Will swallows, and nods. "You don't have to answer, of course, I am merely curious; did you experience a heat, while you were in there?"

Will tenses, his jaw clenching so hard his molars rub together. "Kind of a personal question, Doctor," he replies evenly.

"And as I said, you are not obligated to answer it. But if you didn't, then you may while working for Mason Verger, and it would be advisable to set up some provisional suppressants or arrangements for when you do."

Will swallows. "I went into heat," he replies. He lowers his gaze, looks down at his hands, watches his fingers flex and settle on his thighs. "It was after Randall died."

Hannibal gives another nod, a soft, sympathetic sound rolling in the space between them. "I am very sorry to hear how you suffered in that place, Will," he says, and he sounds genuine. Will presses his lips together, scratches absently at his knee. "Even more so, that you were alone through it."

"Wouldn't have mattered," Will replies. "She kills everyone who comes in that place."

"And yet she let you live," Hannibal says. "Why do you think that is?"

"I don't know," Will says honestly. He looks at Hannibal, focuses on the knot of his tie, swallows and looks down again. "I don't even know why she let Randall live that long. She hates Alphas." He sucks in an unsteady breath. "I knew we shouldn't have gone in. I don't know how I knew, but I did, and I went in anyway."

"Because your mate asked you to," Hannibal murmurs.

Will's brow lower, and he shakes his head. "We weren't mated," he says. "Not…. Not officially."

Hannibal's head tilts. "You never shared a heat with him?" he asks, and Will shakes his head. "That's…interesting, Will, I'll admit. I heard from Mister Dolarhyde that you and Mister Tier were courting for quite a long time."

"Two years," Will agrees. He presses his lips together and rubs a hand over the old, old scarring from Randall's bite on his neck. It's thin, was laid almost politely. Randall had no desire to knead his jaws and fuck Will's neck up permanently like some Alphas do. "I didn't want to mate until I was ready to have kids. Never got the chance, I guess."

"You are still young," Hannibal says. "There may be some opportunity in the future, if that's what you want."

Will huffs, and glares at Hannibal's knee. Hannibal smiles, and sits forward, forcing Will to lift his eyes and meet his dark gaze. "Agent Crawford asked for my evaluation of you," he says, and Will nods. "I don't think you're crazy, Will. Nor do I think you are, in this moment or any preceding it during your time in that house, capable of cold-blooded murder. I do, however, think you could do with some consistency. Doctor Bloom will remain your primary counsellor, but I will also offer my services to you, in case you have need of them."

Will frowns. "Why?"

"I mean no disrespect to Doctor Bloom – she is a capable and kind soul, and in my opinion, the best in her field – but she is female. She doesn't understand how the world feels to Alphas, or Omegas, just as men like us can never truly sympathize with the trials of being female. I would be remiss if I didn't offer you the opportunity for specialized care. If you want it."

He sits back. "I am already familiar with the family, and make visits to the house within the parameters of my other duties. It is no inconvenience."

Will tilts his head, considering that, and meets Hannibal's eyes for a brief moment. He can't imagine Mason going to therapy with this kind of Alpha; he's too absolute, too calm and controlled. Mason is the kind of person, Will senses, that likes making a spectacle of himself, and he doubts Hannibal would tolerate that kind of behavior.

"Margot?" he guesses.

Hannibal's eyes shine with amusement. "I couldn't possibly say," he replies, and Will huffs, but smiles back. "You have sharp eyes, Will. You seem very intelligent."

"You sound surprised."

"I have found that the more intelligent someone is, or thinks they are, the less likely they are to go along with flights of fancy without relentless and constant proof." Will frowns. "If there are such things as spirits, and demons, and they are to blame for the carcasses left in the wake of your visit, then I trust the word of an intelligent man more than a simpleton."

"Careful, Doctor Lecter," Will says. "It sounds like I'm convincing you."

"We may never know," Hannibal replies, but his smile is wide enough to show his teeth, and the sight of it makes Will shiver. Hannibal stands, and Will rises with him, unwilling to remain sitting so Hannibal can tower over him. Hannibal folds his chair, tucks it under his arm, and gives Will a single, gracious nod. "Thank you for indulging me, Will. I hope that, in time, you will seek out my counsel and consider me someone you can turn to."

"People have a habit of dying around me," Will says darkly.

Hannibal huffs a laugh, more a puff of air than a real thing. "Don't worry about that," he says, voice bright with mirth. "I, like you, have a habit of surviving." He gives Will another nod. "Until next time."

"Have a good night, Doctor Lecter," Will replies, and Hannibal smiles at him, and turns to leave. As soon as he's out of sight, Will collapses back onto the cot, breathing out heavily like he'd spent the entire conversation holding his breath. Hannibal's scent teases at his nose, vibrant and spiced like mulled wine and rich, red meat. It makes his mouth water, his stomach tense with something akin to hunger.

He sighs, and lies down, closing his eyes and willing himself to fall asleep.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

> sorry for the delay, guys! I'm working at a tax accountant's office and as you can imagine it's busy as shit and I'm usually braindead by the time I get home. I hope you like the chapter! :D

"Thank you for agreeing to see me, Mister Dolarhyde. I know the last few days have been very stressful for you and appreciate you taking the time -."

She trails off, as Francis merely stares at her. Clears her throat, dipping her eyes down in a classic move around a foreign Alpha, deferring and demure without being outright submissive. Women do that a lot, he's noticed – except Bev. No one can cow Bev.

"Is Will alright?" Francis asks.

She nods, smiling. "He's going to be assigned into my care today," she says. She has a nice smile, this Doctor Alana Bloom. Kind eyes, pale, the look of a mother and older sister and every protective feminine figure wrapped into one, with a spine of steel. Francis blinks at her at this new information. "I'm also going to be his counsellor, while he's working for Mister Verger. Since you're the closest family he has, I figured we should meet each other. And we can keep in touch, during the investigation around the house and at any other time."

"Like when and if Crawford decides to haul him off to jail for murder," Francis mutters. She doesn't outright deny it, nor admit it, but her cheeks color with guilt. "My little brother went to a therapist when he was a kid, Doctor, you're not fooling anyone. You came here to pick my brain."

"And are you going to let me pick?" Alana asks, tilting her head so her hair falls in a soft wave down one side of her neck. "Or should I just leave?"

Francis huffs through his nose, fingers flexing where they're laced. She asked to meet him in a Silver Diner of all places, off the artery into the Beltway. Somewhere high-traffic but low-attention for morning commuters. They're mostly the only people in the restaurant, which is probably good when the conversation inevitably turns to the ridiculous and insane.

"I guess the dead don't need secrets," he says. "And if…if it helps Will, sure. I'll answer your questions."

"Thank you, Francis," Alana replies with another kind smile. Francis has to hand it to her – she makes the transition from distant professional to eager ear and confidante as smoothly as he's ever seen. She has a notebook beneath her right hand, and a pen. She takes the pen in

hand, but doesn't open the notebook yet, tapping instead with the nib against the ring binding. "Would you consider yourself close with Will?"

Francis frowns. "Pretty close," he says slowly. "Randall loved him more than anything in the world, and I loved my brother. That's about as far as it went."

She blinks, brows rising. "That's an interesting thing to say."

"Well, it's true," Francis snaps. "It's what you're trying to get me to say. Or steer me towards. No Alpha's just gonna start spouting shit about ghosts or go on a wild goose chase and burn down a building unless they're up to their ass in something, right?"

She hums.

"Will and I aren't fucking," Francis says sharply. "Before the house, I hadn't seen him for months. There's no coercion happening here, Doctor Bloom."

Alana tilts her head again, flips the first page of her notebook and jots down two letters – 'OP'. She underlines them, and adds 'CS/SG?' after. "I haven't spoken to Will much, yet," she admits. "But I can tell he's…very special."

Francis frowns at her.

"He isn't crazy," he says. "He's not. Have you watched the footage?"

Alana sighs, shaking her head. "No. It's still being held as evidence for the investigation."

"Watch it," he urges her, reaching out to take her hand. "You have to watch it, Doctor Bloom. I swear, we're not making this shit up, we're not faking it. There was something evil in that house. Will lived with it longer than any of us, and yeah, maybe that fucked him up, but he's not crazy and he didn't kill all those people."

"You really think he's innocent?" Alana asks – challenging, but gently. "I'll admit it's almost unheard of for an Omega to commit a violent crime, Mister Dolarhyde, but there's a first time for everything. You *truly* believe Will could have never laid a hand on your brother? That it was this…woman, who killed them all?"

"There are more accusations against ghosts and aliens than Omegas, Doctor Bloom," Francis tells her with a wry smile. "Yeah, I don't know Will that well, maybe I should have tried harder. Maybe Randall would still be alive if I'd thought to look for them sooner, but I know, I would stake my *life* on it, that Will would never hurt him." He sighs, shakes his head, looks down at his hands.

Alana's gaze is soft with pity, as she flattens her free hand over Francis'. "Your testimony said you heard your brother, in that house," she says. Francis nods. "He told you to save Will?"

He nods again.

She pats his hand and gives him another warm smile. "Thank you, Mister Dolarhyde. Here." She sits back and pulls a business card from her purse, handing it to him. "My cell number is

on there. If you have any questions, or want an update on Will's investigation or well-being, give me a call."

Francis presses his lips together, eyes her, and then nods, pocketing the card. "Do you think I can see him?" he asks. "Before they cart him away?"

"I'll do my best to make that happen."

There is someone staring at him.

The air is so fucking cold that Will's fingers have frozen to the metal railing of his uncomfortable cot. He doesn't dare move, doesn't dare pull himself into a tighter ball to try to save his hands and his feet. He's facing the stone wall, it was stupid to turn his back on the room. Stupid, that's the kind of shit that gets you killed.

The heavy inhales and exhales of whoever is staring at him sound like a panting dog, a snarl rattling from deep within, between someone's collarbones. A whistle of air through jagged teeth.

Will clenches his eyes tightly shut. He doesn't have a blanket to hide under, here. Nothing wide or black enough. She'll find him, oh God, she's found him, she's going to -.

A single step. Heels on linoleum. The soft drag of melting flesh across metal.

Will sucks in a breath, breathes in so deep until his lungs feel like they'll burst, and slowly pushes himself upright, letting his blanket fall along his waist. Rolls, until he's sitting, hands braced behind him.

Turns his head.

Her shoes, her rotting legs, the wisps of her dress, her long clawed hands. Her open maw and red, red, *red* eyes. It's all the same, and it's staring at him from the other side of the bars. Her fingers that turn into claws at the ends are wrapped too-wide around the bars, and Will can smell burning flesh.

She parts her jaws and shrieks wordlessly at him, and Will trembles with fear. The air is so cold, his breath is misting, his fingers are blistered and skin has peeled from touching metal. Every muscle in him is locked up and frozen. He can't call for help – who would hear him, that could stand against her? He can't run, she's blocking the only exit, and that's assuming he can convince his legs to move.

She reaches between the bars, claws raking the air like she might be able to stretch so far, she can rip the flesh from his bones. Will flinches, back hitting the wall, panting. The air stinks of smoke, it's getting hard to breathe, but he can't take his eyes off her. He looks away, he dies. Can't break eye contact, can't, *don't you fucking dare look away*.

She continues to stare at him with her angry eyes, jaws gaping around nothingness. She pulls her hand back and twists with a series of sharp cracks, and Will's eyes widen when he sees one of her feet come forward, through the bars, landing with a hollow 'click' that sucks the rest of the sound from the room. Her hips twist, skeletal, and fit through. Will's breath comes faster.

"What do you *want*?" he demands, voiceless but for a tiny snatch of air. She hisses at him, hair flying around her as she jerks her head, neck snapping like it's broken, the tick of a clock from twelve to four. Her entire body seems to judder in place, melting around the bars as she works her hips through, her torso still on the other side, her claws scraping along the bars. "What the fuck do you *want* from me?"

She stares at him, and forces herself through the bars with another shudder, edges going blurry and then recementing in place. The act of forcing herself between the tight bars cracked her rips open, and Will watches in horror as blood as red and wet as a fresh kill spills from where her ribs have pierced her from the inside, spread out and curled forward like a reaching hand.

She wails, suddenly, tearing at her hair, approaching him with her claws extended. Will can't move, he can't fucking move, and her cries are so loud they echo in his head like there's nothing in there but open walls and stone floors that ring and reverberate with her shrill, hollow chorus.

She grips his neck fiercely, nails cutting through skin as easily as teeth. She brings herself in close and Will sees that the red in her eyes is not caused by what he would normally associate with Alpha iris coloration. It's not something in her iris, but a sheen like blood on a mirror. She blinks at him, and starts to weep, two thick lines of red dripping from her eyes and staining her cheeks.

She parts her jaws and Will flinches, kicks at her, right into the center of her broken chest. She goes stumbling back and he scrambles to his feet, falling off the cot and onto his hands and knees, no thought in him but escape. He'll beat himself bloody and break himself open trying to get through the bars if he has to.

He only makes it a step before she's on him, pinning him to the floor and heavy as lead. She's still sobbing and Will feels her blood on his back, feels as her body descends and pierces him like an embrace of hooks. He screams, but then her hand is around his mouth, silencing him.

She nuzzles his bared neck, forcing his chin up and away until she can lick over the scarred bite Randall left on his throat.

Then, suddenly, the wailing stops. There is only the sound of her sobs.

"I just want you to be safe," she whispers, and bites down, jaws wide as a snake, and Will feels her fangs meet around his esophagus. Blood floods his mouth.

He surges awake with a frantic cry, falling to his hands and knees on the floor and retching, vomiting up a huge, wet puddle of his evening meal. There are flecks of red in the mess, not so much that he fears internal bleeding, but enough that he notices.

He's soaked with sweat, and claws at his back, gasping as he feels a series of open, tender wounds that match the way her ribs pierced him. He stifles a scream behind his clenched teeth, gagging at the scent of his vomit, able to smell his blood along with it, his sweat soaked into the air to color it a pale yellow. He might have pissed himself too, it's hard to tell since he's so wet all over, but the sourness of urine is an unmistakable note in there as well. It might be from the open toilet, but he can't be sure.

He hears rushing footsteps and the clang of his cell opening, two Alpha policemen running in. Their voices are loud and harsh and Will covers his ears, curling up on himself, shaking his head as they try to speak to him. One of them reaches out and he snarls, turns his head and bites, *hard*, gets a coat sleeve and skin in his teeth and *rips*.

The Alpha stumbles back with a yelp, and then there's a hand flattening over the nape of his neck, forcing him into laxness, into stillness. He curses the wiring of his own body, that Omegas will go pliant and weak at a touch to their neck. He kneels, panting heavily, trembling, and hears Jack's thundering voice ring out;

"What the Hell is going on here?"

"We heard screaming, Sir," the Alpha Will bit says. "Came to investigate. Found him like this."

Will looks up, and then closes his eyes, a heavy shudder rolling down his spine. Fuck, this isn't going to help his case. Showing any capacity for violence is counterintuitive right now – Jack and good lawyers will make it seem like he's gone feral, that he is capable of hurting someone, even his boyfriend.

Jack's shoes are all he can make himself see, but then they are not the only pair clouding his vision. Will looks up again, swallowing back the lingering bile in his mouth when he recognizes the fancy cut of the outfit. Higher still, to familiar hands, a broad chest. Hannibal's scent floods his mouth and makes his empty stomach tense sharply.

Hannibal is looking at the scene with a carefully placid expression. His eyes meet Will's, and Will cannot read the emotions, the thoughts there. It's like staring at a piece of black glass. Hannibal turns his head and makes a quiet sound, and Jack steps to one side, allowing him to enter.

"Release him," Hannibal commands, all the power and authority of an established Alpha in his voice. Will whimpers when the hand on his neck moves away. Hannibal crouches on the other side of the pool of vomit, his eyes on Will. "Can you stand?"

Will looks down, settles on his heels, curls his trembling hands in his lap. Hannibal reaches out, and Will flinches at first, but then reaches and puts his hand in Hannibal's. Hannibal smiles, his expression smoothing into one affectionate and gentle, and rises to his feet, pulling Will along with him.

"Come," he says, circling the mess, leading Will back to his cot. He has Will sit, and Will curls in on himself, shivering in the presence of so many Alphas towering over him. Hannibal sits next to him, his touch feather-light and entirely proper. He checks Will's pulse, frowning in concern when he feels it flying. He touches his knuckles to Will's forehead. "Do you feel nauseous?"

Will shakes his head.

"What have you had to eat?"

Will gestures to the mess he left. "Meatloaf," he rasps, his throat sore from screaming and vomiting. The two guards who came in to check on him leave, one of them clutching his forearm and cursing him out while the other pats his shoulder and takes him to the medical station. "Water."

Hannibal hums. His eyes fall to the huge sweat stain Will left behind in his bed, and his frown deepens. He leans in and takes an exaggerated inhale.

Will tenses, snapping his teeth together. "Did you just *smell* me?"

"Difficult to avoid," Hannibal says, his tone too light. "I was simply making sure you weren't experiencing pre-heat. Nausea, sweating, and defensive behavior are all common symptoms."

Will's eyes move to Jack, sees the other Alpha staring at Will like Will suddenly sprouted horns. He wraps his arms around his knees, pulls them up, and looks away.

"Agent Crawford, would you mind giving us a moment?" Hannibal asks lightly. "I'd like to speak to Will alone. Doctor-patient confidentiality and all that."

Jack huffs. "He just attacked someone, Doctor. I can't rightly leave you alone with him."

"I'm sure it was simply an effect of hyperactive defensiveness. No fear of that now, isn't that right, Will?" Hannibal says, smiling at him. Will swallows and nods. He's sure he looks quite a sight, pathetic and trembling and with a whine stuck in the back of his throat. Hannibal's warmth calls to him like a roaring fire, and he feels so fucking cold.

Jack huffs again. "I'll be right outside," he warns, and leaves, closing and locking the cell behind him.

As soon as Hannibal deems him out of earshot, he turns back to Will, and Will closes his eyes as a hand gently squeezes his shoulder. He winces when Hannibal sees the blood on his back, and he touches the wounds, and Will hears Hannibal make a surprised noise. "Are these new?" he asks.

Will nods.

"Did you do this to yourself?"

"You wouldn't believe me," Will rasps.

"I think you'd be surprised with what I will and will not believe," Hannibal argues gently. Will hums, pressing his lips together, wetting them. His mouth is dry and tacky and tastes like vomit. He flinches, when Hannibal takes his chin, forces him to turn. Their eyes meet and Will gets the hysterical, frantic feeling that he would do well not to look away. Hannibal's eyes, whiskey and earth and that deep, rich red, have the same kind of pull as the lady of the house. "Tell me."

"It was her," Will says. Hannibal's hand drops, so they're no longer touching, and Will swallows back a whimper of loss. "I was…dreaming, I guess. She was standing right there, right outside the cell." He looks to where she was, almost expects there to be marks from her claws set into the bars. Of course, there is nothing. "She came in. She attacked me. I tried to run but she -."

He falls silent, petting over his throat, over the scar from Randall's bite. There's nothing there, no new marks of teeth, no fresh blood, no slick except for his own cold sweat. He shivers.

"Has she visited you any other time since you left the house?" Hannibal asks. There's no judgement in his voice. When Will looks at him, he thinks Hannibal's gaze is closer to intrigued than disbelieving.

He nods. "In the motel, before Crawford brought us all in. She tried to kill Francis, and when I tried to stop her, she almost killed me."

"You told me she hates Alphas," Hannibal notes. "Perhaps she sees them as a threat. That's why she kills them?"

Will bares his teeth. "Don't try to coddle me, Doctor Lecter," he hisses, shoving himself to his feet and pacing away, mindful of the mess still drying and cooling on the floor. He folds his arms across his chest and glares at Hannibal's shoes. "If you're trying to get me an insanity plea I'd rather go to jail."

"You're already in jail, Will," Hannibal replies. "And you're about to be moved to another, albeit a much nicer one. For all intents and purposes, you will be a prisoner, a ward for Mason Verger. It is in everyone's best interests to know if they are going to be housing someone who is a danger to them, or if you are a danger to yourself."

"I didn't do this to myself," Will snarls. He gestures to his back. "How the fuck would I even have done that? I didn't. It was her. And yeah, maybe it's best to just throw me in a padded cell, even though she's real. She's *real*, and…."

He stops. Hannibal is looking at him with such earnest concern. It feels so strange, to be the receiver of it after so long without any kind look, any physical contact that wasn't drenched in fear and pain. He runs his hands through his too-long sweaty hair, pushes it back from his face, laces his fingers along his nape in an attempt to self-soothe. It doesn't work, it never has.

"I don't know what she wants," Will says quietly. "But she's…she's inside me. She won't leave me alone. I thought…." He chokes, a wretched sob barring the back of his tongue. He

forces the words through anyway; "I thought she was gone. Dead, burned with the rest of the house. But she's not. She's never going to leave me alone."

Hannibal stares at him, and it takes Will a long moment, through his tears and anguish, to realize that the look on Hannibal's face is similar to his own emotions. Stricken. Hannibal looks like he's seen her himself; a monument, cracked at the foundation. Will doesn't like that he caused the Alpha to look like that.

Hannibal clears his throat, like he realized he was showing too much as well, and he stands, straightening out his jacket with the casual air of a ruffled cat. "You have a visitor," he tells Will. "Francis Dolarhyde. He wanted to see you before you were moved. I'll be sitting in on the meeting, both to protect your confidentiality and to assess your interactions."

Will frowns, but has no protest to offer.

"I'll arrange for you to shower and for some fresh clothes for you." Hannibal hesitates, his eyes on the door. "Do you think you'll be alright on your own, for a while?"

Will can't help it; he laughs, hysterical and high. "I have no fucking idea."

Hannibal's mouth twitches, his eyes brightening with a brief flare of shared, helpless amusement. "I appreciate your honesty, Will," he says. "I'll make sure they bring you something to eat, as well. No man deserves to go hungry, and you have suffered more than most."

With that, he calls Jack to him and Jack lets him out. Jack remains, while Hannibal does as he said he would. Will is given fresh clothes and a warm meal, led to a shower that's little better than a hole high in a tiled wall, the water harsh and chilly. He rinses off as best he can, and it's far from the worst he's had. Hannibal is there, when he emerges, dripping and pathetic like a lost puppy.

He smiles, and Will feels warm in his hands and his stomach. He follows Hannibal to one of the interrogation rooms.

"Christ, Will, I'm so, so fucking sorry."

"Why?"

Francis looks a mess, pale and shaken. Will wants to reach out to him, Omega instinct to soothe his packmate fierce in his chest. He's cuffed to the table, 'for his own protection', whatever the fuck that's supposed to mean, so he can't reach.

Francis is on the other side of the table, Hannibal at the third edge like a mediator. He has remained silent past his brief and courteous introduction, a fly on the wall, his face and manner giving nothing away.

"I should have hidden you better," Francis says, his eyes bright with sorrow, scent heavy with shame. He's always been a fiercely loyal pack Alpha and a good leader, Will always liked that about him. It's probably killing him to see someone he considers one of his own in such a mess. "I should have taken you as far away from that fucking house as I could and hidden you away so no one would ever find you."

Will smiles, though the expression is sad. "You got me out," he says quietly, and Francis lifts his eyes. "I'd be dead if it wasn't for you, or still trapped in that place. You saved my fucking life, man, and I set the fire. I deserve whatever happens to me."

"No you *don't*," Francis hisses. "You fucking *don't*, Will, Christ, you didn't deserve to be trapped and terrorized and you don't deserve to be stuck under the heel of some fucker with too much money and a God complex." His eyes flash to Hannibal. "Watched like a Goddamn zoo animal."

"I'll be safe, and taken care of," Will says weakly. "It's better than I was hoping for, not even a week ago."

Francis swallows, rubbing a hand over his scarred mouth. Will presses his lips together, breathes in. He shouldn't be afraid of speaking freely around Hannibal – Hannibal is his doctor, apparently, or one of them, and has no ability to repeat anything he hears. He can make recommendations, sure, and fuck Will over if he decides he belongs in a straight jacket and a padded cell, but there's nothing Will could say that is worse than what he's already said.

"Francis," he begins. "Have you seen her, since we left?"

Francis blinks at him, frowning. Hannibal doesn't move, but Will feels his attention sharpen like a cat with its eyes dilated, staring from the top of the stairs at the movement of a mouse down below.

"The lady of the house. Have you seen her?"

"No," Francis says, and shudders. "Thank God." Will nods, breathing a sigh of relief, and Francis frowns at him. "Wait, have you?"

Will winces, and he supposes that is answer enough.

"Are you fucking serious?" Francis demands, and glares at Hannibal like this is somehow his fault. He looks back to Will. "She's still…? Are you sure?"

Will nods.

"*Fuck*," Francis snarls, sitting back in his chair. "I thought – we burned that fucking house down. She should be *dead*. Gone for good."

"I told you she was tied to me," Will replies. "In the motel room, I told you I saw her. I'm still seeing her. I don't think…." He swallows, a cold shiver of fear running down his spine. "Whatever she wants with me, she's not done yet." He sits forward, reaching as best he can, giving a huff of frustration when the cuffs around his wrists pull tight. Francis meets him

halfway, their fingers lacing. "Promise me, if you see her, if one fucking *hair* on the back of your neck stands up, you'll take the others and run. Promise me you won't let her kill you."

Francis' eyes are bright, and his upper lip curls back to expose more of his teeth. "I'll figure this out, Will," he vows. "I'll find a way to get rid of that bitch for good."

"No, that's not -."

The door opens, and Jack eclipses the doorway. "Time's up, Graham," he says sternly.

Francis snarls at him. "Fuck's sake, man, it's been less than ten minutes!"

"Sorry, Mister Dolarhyde. Mason Verger is an impatient man, and I have better things to do than babysit a suspect when there are places he should be," Jack replies, coolly and sternly. He narrows a glare on Francis that forbids rebuke.

Francis growls, and stands, shoulders low with surrender. He moves his gaze to Hannibal. "If anything happens to him, I'm holding each and every one of you responsible," he threatens.

"Francis," Will says quietly, and shakes his head. "Don't."

Francis growls, and releases Will's hands. He circles the table and takes Will by the chin, lifting him up so that he can tuck his nose to Francis' neck as Francis embraces him tightly. "I'll get you out of this," he promises, whispering the words to Will's hair. Will sighs, closing his eyes, and simply nods, knowing that Francis will not be deterred.

"Mister Dolarhyde," Jack calls, and Francis straightens with another growl. He nods to Will, pets his hair back from his face, and offers him a comforting smile, before he turns, and Jack escorts him out. For a moment, Hannibal and Will are alone.

Hannibal shifts his weight like a machine coming back to life, and Will slants his gaze his way. "If you're going to make a comment about the devotion Omegas inspire, or some other pseudo-pack mentality bullshit, I'd rather you remain silent."

Hannibal laughs. It's a warm sound, soothing and low. It's nice. "That wasn't my intention," he replies gently. "Rather, I was going to say that Francis is a passionate young man, and has many of the fine qualities I would expect from a pack leader."

Will hums, hiding a smile. "Randall was the same," he says, his voice soft, and sad.

"Sometimes, when the world is against you, it is the loyalty and love of one good friend that can make all the difference," Hannibal tells him. He speaks like someone who knows that fact intimately. Will tilts his head, but before he can ask, Jack comes back, keys jangling in his hand.

"Time to go, Will," he says, gruff but not unkind. Will swallows, and lifts his wrists so that Jack can release him. He pushes himself to his feet, and follows Jack out, Hannibal bringing up the rear. A silent shadow, and it feels protective. Will's neck is warm, and he feels the weight of Hannibal's presence like a stone in his chest.

The day is cool, a light breeze bringing the scent of grass and diesel. It promises to be cloudless. Will sucks in a breath, rolls his shoulders, and follows Jack to the car.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

> Please note the new tags! Hannibal performs an invasive medical procedure on Will (with grey consent) and there's mention of past miscarriage and infidelity on Will's part. It's not graphic and the scene itself is very short. Feel free to message me for more details before reading if you need it.
>
> Enjoy! <3

In all honesty, Will isn't certain what he expected the house of 'some fucker with too much money and a God complex' to look like. He's heard enough comments from and around the Vergers to know they make Midas look poor, so part of him expects a grand, castle-like building, sprawling old mansions and acres and acres of land. Pristine lawns and marble statues of little naked angels and lunging lions and everything else rich Americans try to bring over from every country except their own.

The entire complex is surrounded by a tall hedge, thick and bright green. It feels too cool to be summer quite yet, although Will can admit his internal body temperature and judgement of what's hot or not is likely fucked six ways to Sunday. There's a guardhouse with a single Alpha standing watch, and he waves them through once Jack flashes his badge and introduces himself and Will.

"Mister Verger is expecting you," the man tells them. "Take the second right and head towards the main house."

The fact that there's a 'main' house, implying other houses, makes Will's mouth twitch. He's sitting in the passenger seat of the FBI vehicle Jack drives, and Hannibal's shiny, beautiful dark blue Bentley is behind them. Will settles in his seat and angles his head so he can keep the side-view mirror, and Hannibal's reflection, in sight.

Past the guardhouse is a second fence, brown and chest-height. The road parts briefly for a little grate to prevent livestock accidentally wandering through it, and then they are driving down a lone paved driveway, lined with tall trees on each side to provide shade, lawn stretching out wide on either side. Will spies a few buildings as they drive on in silence; one that looks like a stable, with another fenced area set up with jumps. A second building looks like a giant garage, probably for all those expensive cars rich people hoard.

Jack takes the second right, and they crest a hill, and Will gasps.

"Holy shit," he mutters.

Jack huffs a laugh. "Yeah, it certainly makes an impression."

"Understatement."

It's…almost sickeningly ostentatious, in Will's opinion. Yes, the tall windows and carved statues and patterns of vines lining the edges of the house is not specifically offensive, there's nothing *nauseatingly* opulent about the outside of the house. Except that it's huge, and towers over them as they approach like a stern father figure watching his wayward son come home.

It's too clean.

The only house Will has paid attention to with any detail in the last months has been *that* house, and yes, it was certainly grand and majestic and would have caused a similar anxious roll of nausea in his stomach in its prime, but it had been humbled, by time and decay and neglect. It had forfeited grandeur for personality. Admiration for bitter, seething hatred.

Will almost prefers it. There are no down-drawn brows in the shape of collapsing gutters, no lidless windows blinking owlishly at them as they approach. No inviting, open maw. Instead, the house has its nose turned up at them, haughty.

You'll rot one day, too, Will thinks viciously, as they pull around a small patch of grass in an oval in front of the house. In the middle of the grass is a statue of a muscled man wrestling a bull. *One day you'll look back on this moment and wish you had been kinder.*

Jack gets out of the car first, circling around and opening Will's door for him. He's not cuffed but he's certainly in no state to try fleeing, and Jack has a gun, and there are guards everywhere. He wouldn't make it two feet, not least because he's sure both Jack and Hannibal would be more than capable of catching him.

Hannibal approaches as if summoned by Will's thoughts, and gives him a warm, encouraging smile. Will, despite himself, manages to smile back. Hannibal is a calming and steady influence, and so is Jack, albeit in a gruffer and more rigid kind of way. A firm mattress and a soft pillow.

Around the circle of grass is a ring of gravel, wide enough for three cars to park abreast, and it crunches under their feet as they walk towards the McMansion. As they approach the bottom of the steps leading up to the grand main doors, they open, revealing Margot Verger, Alana at her side.

Will blinks in surprise, but he probably shouldn't be. They are going to be his legal guardians, after all, and therefore have the social obligation of welcoming him in and getting him settled. Alana's expression is set into a gentle, welcoming smile, Margot more reserved, but her eyes are warm. As Will is the Omega, he cannot greet them first, and so remains silent as Jack shakes Alana's hand, then Margot's.

"Thank you for meeting with us," Hannibal says. He has his coat folded in front of him, hanging from his bent arm. They're standing relatively close and Will can't stifle the image of Hannibal putting a hand at the small of his back, like a chaperone or socialite. It causes a

fissure of warmth to spread up his spine, and he shakes the image away forcefully. Trust him to get attached to the first Alpha that shows him a modicum of kindness.

"It's our pleasure," Margot says. Her voice is even, and she smiles, her eyes landing on Will. "Mason is inside, ready to sign the papers for your contract, but first we need to sign for your guardianship."

Will nods. "I understand," he replies.

Margot nods, her eyes moving to Hannibal for a brief moment, before she turns away and walks back into the house. Alana gives Will another encouraging smile just like Hannibal did – must be a therapist thing – and turns to follow her. Jack takes the lead and Hannibal brings up the rear.

The inside of the house does nothing to settle Will's nerves or dull his teeth. It's pristine and black and white marble, gold picture frames around evocative and opulent art. There are even fucking vases sitting on marble pedestals. It's grotesque in its grandeur and makes Will itch.

Hannibal walks beside him once they're inside, the doors closing behind them, and Will feels his eyes on the side of his face, but refuses to meet them. "Are you alright?" he murmurs, low enough that even the barren walls do not echo.

Will wants to lie, but he finds it strangely difficult to lie to Hannibal. Still, he's not quite sure to explain how he felt more welcome and comfortable in the other house than this one. Hannibal will likely write it off as some overzealous nesting instinct; Omegas aren't exactly known for their tolerance of unmarked territory or new environments.

So he says, "I've been in worse."

Which is objectively true. And he hears in Hannibal's small hum that Hannibal knows he's full of shit.

"The Vergers have lived in this house for a long time," he tells Will, like some kind of tour guide. "Molson Verger was their father, and their grandfather, Milton Verger, was the one who originally built the house that exists today. They've added rooms, even as recently as I've known the family."

"I guess everyone needs more wall space," Will replies archly.

Hannibal tilts his head.

"Neither of them are mated or married, there's no children. No family, if they're the only surviving heirs. No dad or mom to make more babies. A big house with no one to live in it."

Hannibal hums curiously. "Of course, I cannot assume I know everything about the family's affairs, but they are both still young, closer to your age than mine." Will huffs, glancing at Hannibal out of the corner of his eye. He finds it difficult to look away from Margot and Alana, though; their heels click and echo on the floor and without looking and knowing the

source, it's easy to lose himself elsewhere. "Perhaps one day there will be little Vergers running around."

Will presses his lips together, bites his tongue. He doubts a man like Mason has the inclination or desire to marry and sire children, nor to let the reins on his sister grow too slack. Alphas are funny that way. "Until then, it's servants and slaves," he mutters.

Before Hannibal can reply, they emerge into a large sitting room, with a big, padded white couch, a dark desk that gleams in the sunlight streaking through the parted curtains, more of that gold and leaf motif along the ceiling. It's clean and clinical and feels more like a hospital than anything else and Will fights the urge to rub his hands and his cheek on every surface he can touch.

"Please, have a seat," Margot says, gesturing to the couch. "Would anyone like something to drink?"

Will sits in the middle of the couch, Hannibal on one side, Jack on the other. Across from the table are two over-stuffed chairs patterned with blue embroidered swirls. Alana takes one and Margot takes the other.

"I'm alright, thanks," Jack says.

"Some water would be lovely," Hannibal adds.

Will nods. "Water for me, too, please," he asks.

Margot nods with a smile, and rings a little bell, summoning a woman in a maid's uniform. "Some water and four glasses, please, Esther. Thank you." The woman nods and disappears, and the coil of nausea in Will's gut pulses *hard*.

On the table are two copies of what he assumes is his guardianship contract. Margot notices him looking, and gestures for him to take one to read it over. He does, sitting back on the – admittedly very comfortable – couch and flipping to the first page.

"If you'd like a lawyer to look over it, that's alright," Margot suggests kindly. "We have one on retainer; he can be here in an hour."

"Shouldn't be too complicated," Will replies. "Not my first guardianship contract."

A flicker of unease and discomfort passes through the air, and Will bites his lip so he doesn't smile. It's a touchy subject these days. There are those who believe Omegas should be allowed to be their own citizens, that guardianship is an archaic practice and should be done away with. Others don't. Will has no doubt that Mason is one of the second kind of people.

It's pretty standard, from what Will can see. Will's mating and marriage rights are to be forfeited to Margot and Alana, he is essentially their ward, and they are legally obligated to take care of him and make sure he isn't neglected. Until Will is handed off to an approved-of Alpha, he's little better than their child, with all the same freedoms and rights thereof.

There are perks to having wealthy guardians, he supposes, and Margot and Alana seem kind enough. He's had worse.

There is a clause at the bottom, stating that Will's previous guardian – Randall Tier – cannot sign over ownership, and that in lieu of his signature, Agent Jack Crawford, as a licensed public servant, will be assigned with the transfer of ownership. Reading Randall's name leaves a sour taste in his mouth.

"So what happens if you charge me?" Will asks, turning to Jack and holding up the contract. "Does this get voided?" Because there's nothing in there pertaining to his unique circumstances.

Jack shakes his head. "No. Legally you are still under Doctor Bloom and Miss Verger's care. They will be responsible for sourcing you a lawyer, handling your defense, and providing bail if it comes to that. If you are convicted, it will mark their record just like if you had always been under their guardianship."

Will frowns. "That doesn't seem fair," he argues, and looks to the women. "You don't know me from Adam. A black mark will look bad on your reputations."

"It's a risk we're willing to take," Alana says with a smile.

Will sighs, running a hand through his hair. He can't exactly argue with them, he supposes, but; "Randall was never my legal guardian, by the way," he says. "We never mated for real."

Alana doesn't seem surprised by this, but Margot's brow creases in a frown, and she looks to Jack. "Will that affect the contract?" she asks.

"Who is your legal guardian, Will?" Hannibal asks. "It can't be your father."

"I…." No. It can't be his father, because his father died when he was younger. He frowns. "I guess I don't know. It can't be my mom, she ran off when I was a kid. I have no siblings, so…." He shrugs.

"If we're not able to locate your legal guardian, then my signature still stands," Jack says with a nod. He takes out a pen from his pocket and takes the contract from Will, outlining the clause with Randall's name and crossing it out, leaving only the part saying that Jack will be the transferrer since there is no living legal guardian. Will's fingers flex, he swallows tightly, seeing Randall's name disappear behind the veil of ink. Erased, just like that. Here and then gone again.

Esther returns with a tray, a pitcher of water and four glasses atop it. She sets it on the table and pours them all out, serving Hannibal first, and then the women, and then Will last. Will smiles gratefully and takes a long drink, wishing it was something stronger.

"There we go," Jack says, having altered the second copy in the same way. He sits back and pockets his pen. "Any additional objections?"

"Just on the record as saying that I wish there was another way," Will replies.

Margot gives him a concerned look that borders on pity. "I wish there was, too, Will. If I had my way you'd be able to do as you like, but this is keeping you out of a holding cell."

The 'For now' is implied.

"Guess so," Will sighs. He takes the first copy of the contract and signs for his name. Jack signs as the transferrer, on the first and second, and Will pushes both to Margot and Alana so they can sign. Finally, both are given to Hannibal, who adds his signature as a witness to the deal.

"Now for part two," Margot says quietly. She takes her copy and sets it on the desk. The second copy goes to Jack for any legal recourse should they need it. "I'll go fetch Mason."

She leaves the room, and Will shivers as he hears her heels clicking away. Jack's phone rings, and he stands, taking the call with an apologetic nod to the three of them. "Crawford," he answers, and leaves the room so that he can take his call in relative privacy.

Hannibal crosses one leg over the other, settling with a sigh and nursing his water. "You're looking well, Alana," he says, with the fondness and familiarity of old friends. She smiles at him. "How is your practice going?"

"Well," she replies. "Thank you."

"I hope you haven't been run too ragged by our mutual friends."

She laughs, and shakes her head, her cheeks coloring slightly. Will tilts his head, considering her as she looks to Margot's chair, and then to the door. It's subtle, but just a flash of affection crosses her face, and Will is sure that it's not for Mason. Margot might be Hannibal's patient, but Alana seems like the kind of person more able to handle Mason's personality, and he's sure, suddenly, that there's a reason she spends more time here than she ought to. That Margot was so willing to co-sign as Will's guardian when Alana volunteered.

Their eyes meet, and Alana's cheeks darken, as though she knows she got caught. "How are you feeling, Will?" she asks kindly, setting her glass down and resting her elbows on her knees.

"Peachy," Will replies.

She smiles. "I met with Francis, before you came here," she tells him. Ah, that must be why she wasn't surprised to hear Randall was never Will's official mate. Francis must have told her. "He loves you very dearly."

"He loves his brother," Will replies. "I was a given."

Hannibal makes a sound, and Will turns to him with an arched brow. Hannibal smiles. "Do you have a habit of downplaying your effect on the people in your life?" he asks. Will frowns. "You scolded me for the thought before, but it wasn't incorrect; Omegas inspire devotion, Will, and I daresay your pack Alpha has a fierce loyalty to you, especially if you never mated with his brother properly."

"If you're going to imply something, I'd rather you just said it outright," Will says tersely.

"Am I implying something?" Hannibal counters. His smile holds too many teeth.

Will takes another long drink of water and sets the glass down with a firm *clink*. "Francis and Randall were the first Alphas who ever treated me like a person," he says harshly, glaring at the shiny glass on top of the table. "In a long-ass time. I considered them family." He lifts his eyes and meets Alana's compassionate gaze. "And I didn't kill Randall, and I didn't do anything with Francis."

"We never said you did," Hannibal replies coolly.

"No, but you're trying to figure it out anyway," Will snaps, glaring at Hannibal's knee. "I…. I get it. You're psychiatrists, therapists, whatever. It's in your nature to poke and prod and try to get to some deeper truth about your patients, but therapy has never worked on me and I have nothing to hide. So if you have questions, just fucking ask them."

Hannibal is smiling, like Will is an animal that just learned a particularly amusing new trick. His head tilts. "Have you been to therapy before?" he asks.

Will huffs, sitting back. "A few times," he admits. "After my dad died, I was forced to. Then when I moved, I had to before anyone would sublet to me. And when I got my teaching job, again."

"And passed all of their evaluations, I assume," Alana says.

Will nods. He doesn't say it's easy to play that kind of game. It's easy not to come across as anything but normal, slightly boring, slightly nervous. Therapists love vulnerable Omegas, it's like a drug to them. There's entire sections of the discipline dedicated to Omegas, specifically – Alana Bloom is proof of that.

"Will," Alana says quietly, and Will meets her eyes. "Will you tell me about the lady of the house?"

Will freezes. A shudder runs through him, he's completely unable to hide it. He feels Hannibal's vision sharpen on him, though he can't meet either of their gazes. "What do you want to know?" he rasps.

"Was she always there, in that house?" Alana asks.

Will nods. "I think so. She had to have been – I didn't kill all those people, and they were already there when I showed up. And she killed Randall, after a while. She -." He swallows, his fingers trembling, and he tries to hide it by kneading restlessly at his thighs, but it doesn't help. "She's…rotten. Red-eyed."

Alana frowns. "Like Alpha red?"

"No," Will murmurs, remembering her bloody tears. "No, I don't think so. I never…got close enough, not until -."

He can't say it. His back hurts, suddenly, the pinpricks striking through his ribs like they're being remade. Fuck, what if she finds him in here again? There are so many Alphas in this place – Mason, and Cordell, and staff, he's sure. A fresh hunting ground, and Will led her right to it.

He's saved from having to say more by Mason's arrival, the man's wheelchair creaking as he's rolled in by Cordell. Margot is not with them. Mason gives them all a wide, toothy smile, clapping his hands together. "Everyone settling in nicely?" he crows, and Will swallows when those icy eyes turn on him. "Everything's in order. Where's Agent Crawford?"

"He had to take a call," Alana tells him. "I'm sure he'll be back soon."

"Oh, excellent. Well! We can pass the time by getting to know each other a little better." Mason stares at Will, tongue flicking between his teeth, and Will shudders with revulsion. "A medical exam is in order, of course, to make sure we keep you in tip-top shape. Will, sweetheart, why don't you go with Cordell so he can perform it while we wait for Agent Crawford to return?"

Will's eyes widen, and flash up to the other Alpha's face, finding his expression relatively placid, but there's a heat in his eyes that makes Will feel like he's being stared at like a piece of meat. Unbidden, an unsure whine gathers behind his teeth.

Hannibal shifts his weight, putting both feet on the floor. "I will monitor the examination," he declares. Mason's eyes flash, and narrow on him, and Hannibal smiles. "I was a surgeon before my practice; I can offer a second opinion, and make sure everything is in order."

Will isn't particularly eager to be *examined* by two Alphas, but he has to admit the idea of Hannibal being in the room makes the whole ordeal promise to be somewhat less terrifying. He's good at reading people, and Cordell makes him think of a famished wolf. Hannibal, a well-fed predator in his own right. He has never been anything but proper and polite with Will, even when they were alone, and Will is certain he wouldn't allow anything to happen to him that would border on inappropriate.

Mason lets out a small growl of displeasure, but must sense Hannibal won't be dissuaded, as he makes a dismissive gesture and breaks gazes first. "Very well," he concedes, and Hannibal gives him a gracious nod, smiling, and turns to Will.

He holds out his hand, coat abandoned over the armrest of the couch. Will takes it, and lets Hannibal pull him to his feet. They follow Cordell out of the sitting room and into an adjoining room, which has a bed like ones in hospitals, and a clear cabinet of medicines with a lock on it. The air is much colder in here, and Will shivers.

"Sit," Cordell says, gesturing to the bed. Will obeys, his eyes on Hannibal as the other Alpha takes his station at Cordell's shoulder. Cordell slides on a pair of latex gloves, the snap of them around his wrists making Will tense. He takes out a blood pressure cuff. "Sleeve up."

Will rolls his sleeve up to his shoulder, and Cordell takes his blood pressure, Hannibal peering over his shoulder to check the reading. "A little high," he notes, "though that's to be expected, given the circumstances."

Will smiles.

They weigh him – "You're terribly underweight, Will. I'll be suggesting a meal plan to the cooks that will help you gain it back." – and test his reflexes, check his eyes and ears, swab the inside of his mouth and check his teeth to make sure none of them are rotting or missing. They pull a few vials of his blood for testing and to give to the police for their investigation along with the cotton swab of his saliva.

Cordell takes a lock of his hair, for Jack. "Mister Verger insists on all his staff being clean-shaven and well groomed at all times," he says. "We'll be bringing in a barber later today to try and…take care of this," he finishes, waving to the veritable mop that grew during Will's time in the house.

"You can shave it all off, for all I care," Will replies.

Hannibal huffs a laugh. "Nonsense," he says with a warm smile. "Just a trim, I should think. You can keep it long enough to cover your neck, should you need to."

Will flushes, without quite knowing why – except he does know why, he does, damn it.

Cordell packs the measuring equipment away and turns to him. "Alright, strip," he says.

Will's eyes widen. "Why?"

"Need to get you measured for a uniform."

"You are perfectly capable of doing that while I'm clothed," Will snaps.

Cordell blinks at him, as though surprised Will has any bite to match his bark. Beside him, Hannibal is practically vibrating with amusement. Cordell sighs, and even manages to look genuinely apologetic when he says; "I need to perform a cervical exam on you, too. And test you for any diseases."

Will's frown deepens, and every muscle in him goes tense. "You can test my blood," he says, pulling his arms tight around his chest and lifting his shoulders to shield his neck. "And if you think I'm letting you put a fucking hand on me -."

"Mister Graham," Cordell says coldly. "It's routine to -."

"I don't give a fuck what routine is," Will says, shoving himself to his feet and shaking his head. "If you're just gonna throw me in a fucking cell and sue me for everything I have, I'd rather that. You're not doing it. I don't consent to it."

"Will." Will goes quiet at the sound of Hannibal's voice. "Would you consent to *me* performing the exam on you?"

Will blinks at him. Cordell glares, grumbling in displeasure. Hannibal's eyes are dark, earnest, his head tilted just so. He's ready for Will to refuse him, too. Maybe it's just some attempt to convince Will, to say he tried and, despite his best efforts, Will was being

unreasonable, and refused. Maybe it's some weird therapist trick to gain Will's trust – it's certainly hard to be aloof around someone who's been inside you, that's for damn certain.

Will swallows. He doesn't like how his stomach flutters with something dangerously close to anticipation, thinking about Hannibal's big hands on his thighs, picturing his fingers brushing between his legs, sinking in. Unbearably intimate, no matter how clinical.

Will's cheeks feel like they're on fire and his voice is raspy. "It's not necessary," he tries; one last bid for self-control and the freedom of choice he signed away mere minutes ago. "I'm not pregnant and my last heat was unproblematic."

Hannibal nods in understanding. "In Maryland, Omegas are legally obligated to submit to fertility and virginity checks during a change of ownership, and when they have the intention of starting a new dose of suppressants," he says. Will's eyes narrow and he bares his teeth, and Hannibal smiles at him. "It's an archaic and disgusting law, but it *is* the law, Will."

"I'm on the chopping block for murder, *Hannibal*," Will hisses. "The law's not exactly on my side anyway."

"Then you would do well to adhere to the law to the best of your ability. Good behavior and all that." Oh, Will could spit *venom*. But he knows Hannibal isn't telling him this from a place of maliciousness – he's never been aggressive or rude to Will. "If you refuse -."

"*Fine*," Will snaps, hisses the word. "Fucking fine. Just shut up. But you do it, not him," he says, gesturing to Cordell.

Hannibal's eyes brighten with approval, and he turns to the other Alpha. "If you wouldn't mind?"

Cordell glares at both of them, but throws his hands up in surrender, stalking out the door and shutting it behind him. Will watches as Hannibal goes to the supply cabinet, takes out the box of gloves and a sachet of lubricant, and sets them down on the side table next to the blood pressure monitor.

Suddenly, seeing the gloves and lubricant takes all the wind from Will's sails. He lets out another nervous, pathetic noise. "You're not really…. Are you?" he asks. Hannibal looks at him, brows raised. "Can we just lie and say you did it?"

Hannibal sighs through his nose. "I'm going to need samples. Mason will insist on their authenticity." Will swallows harshly, scratching hard at the nape of his neck. As always, his attempts to self-soothe fall flat. "Have you ever had a cervical exam?"

"No," Will mutters. He's never been on suppressant medication either – he could never afford them, even when he had his job. He spent his heats holed up with knotting dildos and a hoard of porn and hid his phone so he didn't do something stupid like call Randall.

Hannibal blinks in surprise, but quickly recovers. "Unfortunately, it's not comfortable," he says gently. "The only thing I can sympathize with that comes close is a prostate exam, though thankfully I have the skills and knowledge to perform them on myself."

"It's different for Omegas," Will says, feeling a frantic flutter of panic building in him. Still, when Hannibal gestures for him to approach, he goes. "You know it's different. You *know* it is."

Hannibal fixes Will with his gaze, his eyes dark with sympathy, but the set of his mouth is firm. "I know," he murmurs. "I can only promise to be professional and quick. We haven't known each other long, but I'm more familiar to you than Cordell is. I think it's safe to say that he would…not be efficient."

Will shudders, grimacing. The idea of Cordell's thick, meaty fingers pawing around inside him, the scent of him pressed on Will from all sides while he's forcing slick and whatever else from Will's body makes him gag. The man smells like paint thinner and latex, not at all like Hannibal's soothing scent.

He's not wrong; Hannibal is more familiar, is a reassuring presence. He doesn't make Will panic. He doesn't seem like the kind of man to be cruel just for the pleasure of cruelty.

And if he is, well. Will isn't a murderer, but he's not above biting back.

He closes his eyes, sucks in a breath, and nods. "You might have to grip me," he says, gesturing to his neck. He doesn't look at Hannibal, doesn't watch for any flare of red. It wouldn't be his fault; it's a natural Alpha reaction. But he doesn't want to look.

Hannibal nods, and pulls on a pair of gloves. "Stand facing the bed, and put your elbows on it," he orders. Will's heart feels like it's going to come out of his chest, his hands tremble as he approaches the bed, pushes down his jeans and underwear so they bunch below his ass, and bends over as Hannibal told him to.

Hannibal steps up behind him, and Will clenches his eyes tightly shut and buries his face in his fists. A hand snakes under his hair, spreading out wide along the back of his neck, and Will gasps as he feels every muscle suddenly go lax.

He hasn't had anyone touch him like this since Randall, and it's hardly as passionate or intimate as that, but it still causes that familiar flicker of heat to stir in his stomach. His muscles loosen, he takes a deep breath and smells Hannibal so strongly, like honey on his tongue. He shivers as Hannibal releases him, for just a moment, hears a rustle of the packet opening, and then Hannibal's hand returns to his neck, and his gloved finger is slick with the lubricant, and he pushes it into Will.

Will bites down on his knuckles, stifling the rough noise he wants to make. It's different for Omegas, they're programed to go weak and pliant when a big, strong Alpha grabs their neck and forces their legs apart. Hannibal's grip is steady, not too tight, just about fucking *perfect*, and the heat of him, the gentle curl of his finger inside Will, sends a tremor through his entire body.

Hannibal works his finger out and pushes in with two so he can get deeper, curling them down until he finds Will's prostate and gives it a single circle, testing that it's not swollen or infected. Will whimpers, gripping the sheet on the bed tightly, stays perfectly still as

Hannibal pushes up, then, to find the opening of his cervix and gently nudge against it, causing a bloom of discomfort through Will's stomach.

"Everything seems normal." Hannibal's voice swims to him like through a thick fog, sounding so far away, echoing. He pauses, and nudges Will's cervical opening again, letting out a soft sound of concern when he finds that it's not as firmly closed as it should be. Omegas only open during heat and birth.

Hannibal goes still. "Will," he says quietly, and Will grunts in answer. "Did you…?"

He doesn't finish the question, but Will knows what he was asking. "Yeah," he rasps, forcing himself to say it. "I knew."

Hannibal's fingers withdraw, and his hand leaves Will's neck, and Will pulls his jeans and underwear back up as Hannibal takes off his glove and seals it in a bag for testing. Will sits on the bed, eyeing Hannibal; his expression is drawn, like it was when Will told him of the lady that morning. Stricken again, fuck, he hates that he keeps putting that look on Hannibal's face.

Hannibal breathes in slowly. "You said you and Randall weren't mated."

"We weren't," Will murmurs. "It wasn't his."

Hannibal frowns at him.

Will presses his lips together, turns his face away. "I got drunk and stupid one night," he says. "Too close to heat, too fuckin'…horny for my own good, I guess. Took a guy home, let him knot me bare. I was going to mate with Randall my next heat and fudge the timeline a little." He looks down at his hands. They're still shaking, and his fingers curl into fists. "He always wanted a big family."

He looks up, to the grotesquely ornate ceiling. "Heat never came. Wasn't hard to figure out why. Never told the guy, didn't even get his name." He laughs, hollow and bitter, and looks down at his hands again. "Then that…*fucking* house…."

"The first trimester is the most dangerous," Hannibal says. He sounds robotic, overly formal. Doctor mode, maybe, or maybe Will has shocked him so much he's forgotten how to behave like a person. "Intense stress is a common factor in a miscarriage."

"She killed him the day after I lost it," Will says. "At first I couldn't tell which blood was his and which was mine."

Hannibal presses his lips together. "So you moved his body?"

Will shakes his head. "Didn't have to. They always ended up down in the basement."

A thought strikes him, then, and he lets out another harsh, bitter laugh. "Maybe it was gonna be an Alpha," he says. "She hates Alphas. Kept Randall alive until I lost it. Slaughtered them both. *Fuck*, I don't know. *Fuck*."

He stands, unable to keep still a moment longer. He paces around the room, his hands trembling, his breathing coming fast. "Goddamn it, I knew, *I fucking knew* we shouldn't have gone in that house. But I wanted him in a good mood, wanted him to just -. I just needed to make up for it, for what I'd done, and now he's fucking *dead*."

He doesn't cry. He doesn't have any more tears to give, but there's a scream stuck in his throat and if he lets it out, it might never stop. He comes to a standstill and tries to breathe, but he can't fucking *breathe* -.

A warm hand threads through his hair, and Will collapses against Hannibal's chest with a pitiful whine. He's warm and solid and he's real, at least he's fucking real. Will clings to him and stifles his wounded, animal sounds against the lapel of his suit jacket as Hannibal embraces him, gently petting through his hair, his other hand rubbing lightly down his injured back.

"You have suffered so much, in so short a time," Hannibal murmurs to his hair. Will swallows, and resists the urge to say that he deserves it. He doesn't think Hannibal would believe him any more than Francis did. "I'm so sorry, Will."

Will huffs, hysterically, and pulls back from him, wiping at his eyes. They burn, and he's probably showing gold as Omegas do in times of high stress. "It's not your fault," he says quietly, looking down at their feet. He clears his throat and breathes in, finds Hannibal's scent eager to make a home for itself in his raw, aching lungs.

He lifts his eyes, clenches his jaw. "I don't want your pity."

"Pity is not what I'm feeling," Hannibal assures him. He doesn't smile, but there's a darkness, a warmth in his eyes that feels comforting. Hannibal presses his lips together, his eyes falling to the glove and the sachet of lubricant. "I have no need to take measurements for you – I know your size from the clothes Francis provided."

The change of subject is abrupt, but Will appreciates it. "Now I just get to sign my soul away, until they arrest me."

"I'm going to do my best to make sure that doesn't happen," Hannibal says. "I believe you are innocent, Will – and even if you aren't, you don't -." He stops himself before he says 'deserve'. "Your fate should not be a prison cell."

"How can you be so sure?" Will demands.

Hannibal smiles. "Because I know monsters when I see them."

Will stares at him, and then he huffs, folding his arms across his chest. "One of these days, you're going to have to tell me your story, Doctor Lecter," he murmurs.

"I will. Happily," Hannibal replies with another smile. "One day. Now, I believe we have kept the others waiting long enough. Are you alright to go back out?"

"Does it matter what I say?"

"Of course it does," Hannibal replies, blinking in surprise. "Your choice *always* matters, Will, and I will defend it through any means necessary."

Will swallows, looking away again. "Do you do this with all your patients?" he asks. Hannibal seems so earnest, so *genuine*. It's hard to navigate, even harder to reconcile. Hannibal knows him just as well as Alana and Margot do, and they're all willing to put so much on the line for him.

Maybe there is something to that whole 'Omegas inspire devotion' bullshit after all.

"No," Hannibal admits, and Will's eyes snap back to him. He smiles. "But I would do it, and more, for my friends. And I'd like to consider us friends."

Will's lips twitch, another helpless flutter of warmth stirring in his stomach. "Yeah," he rasps. "I'd…. I'd like that too."

Hannibal nods, and Will jerks his head back to the closed door. "Shall we?"

Hannibal's smile is wide and affectionate. "After you."

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

> some graphic violence (canon-level, I'd say) and gratuitous trippy nightmare scenes await!

Will signs his soul away with a flick of his pen, Mason as the other signature, Alana, Jack, Margot, and Hannibal acting as witnesses to the new contract. Will is trembling when the contracts are copied and one is given to Mason, one to Hannibal, one to Jack, and one to Margot and Alana as his legal guardians. He still feels split open and torn, shaking from the feeling of Hannibal inside him, spreading him open, the raw confession ripped from the darkest parts of his mind.

He wants to scream, to claw at his own skin, to bare his innocence to all of them. Maybe his organs, his bones, will reveal that he is not a murderer. Maybe they will see, then, when he shows them the raw innards of his own chest.

It feels like he can barely see as he's given a tour of the house, Mason's droning the only sound. Jack leaves, after the tour, after he has examined Will's room and made sure everything is in order. Handed off like a ward of the state. Will's stomach is tense, his mouth flooded with venom, his eyes burning from trying to keep himself from making a sound.

A barber is brought in, and Will gets his hair cut until it resembles the length it had been before he went into the house; combined with the shower and fresh clothes, he feels a little more like himself. More human, though it's hard to tell what that's supposed to feel like anymore.

Hannibal promises to bring him more clothes and arrange for his uniform. He's told that his main task will be the keeping of the stables, though his living arrangements will be kept in the main house. It's a long trek down to the stables, but he goes with Margot, Alana, and Hannibal, so that he can be shown where all the equipment is and introduced to the fine horses kept in the Vergers' care.

"Have you been around horses before, Will?" Margot asks him, her hand on the cheek of a particularly large bay stallion, who snorts and lips at her other hand even though she has no treats to offer.

Will shakes his head. "Dogs, cows mostly," he replied. "My cousin had a farm I'd help out at during the summers."

"They're very well-behaved," Margot tells him, and turns at the presence of a willowy Omega as he appears at the entrance to the tack room. She smiles at the Omega – he's young, close to

her age, with wide blue eyes and short-cropped hair. She waves him over. "This is Peter. He's the lead stable hand and will show you the ropes."

"Nice to meet you," Will murmurs. Peter is demure, even for an Omega, and doesn't meet his eyes. There's a tremor in his hands as he shakes Will's, though Will senses it's not out of fear, just a natural tic. Peter nods briskly in a series of short jerks, like a puppet with its string being pulled, and then Will is led back up to the main house.

"If you need help with anything in the main house, Esther will assist you," Margot tells him. "She's the senior member of staff and knows the ropes better than anyone. She will show you the kitchens and the laundry room, and you'll be responsible for keeping your living space clean and up to Mason's standards."

Will nods, pressing his lips together. He rubs a hand over the back of his neck, feeling oddly exposed at the waft of cool air that brushes his bare skin. His hair is still long enough to tease at it, but it's more exposure than he'd gotten used to in the last few months.

Alana gives him a kind smile. "Would you like to see your room?"

Will doesn't exactly know what else he's meant to do, so he nods, and follows the women down a hallway, where the walls grow close and cramped, and it is noticeably less opulent. Despite himself, he relaxes. This part of the house actually feels lived in, unlike the rest of the too-clean high brow ostentatiousness of the rest of the mansion.

Alana comes to a halt at a plain wooden door, and gestures for him to open it. He does, stepping inside. The room itself is relatively small; there's a single bed tucked into a corner, clothed with white linens. There's a giant closet sitting at the foot of the bed, made of dark wood and carved with a motif of wild animals chasing each other. There is also, he notes with surprise, a door leading to a private bathroom. It's just a toilet and a sink, no shower or bath, but he's surprised to find that he has access to such a thing.

"There's a shower down the hall," Alana tells him, pointing to another closed door. "And here." She opens the closet, revealing the gaping maw of it within. One side of it is empty, leaving space for clothes to hang, and the other side has shelves piled high with fresh sheets and blankets. "You can use these to build a nest, if you'd like."

Will swallows, his throat abruptly going tight. A *nest*. Christ, he hasn't had a nest in what feels like a lifetime. He can't speak, merely gives her a grateful nod, but her soft smile tells him she understands completely.

"We'll leave you to it," Margot says. "Dinner is normally at seven. As our ward, you'll be entitled to dining with us, though we understand if you'd rather be alone for a while."

"Thank you," Will rasps, already decided; he has no desire to share any more space with Mason than he needs to, and while Margot and Alana are friendly enough, their influence isn't enough to make him bear the abrasive man.

She nods, and leaves with Alana. Hannibal lingers, casually observing the space with an evaluative air, lips pursed. Will sits on the edge of the bed, fingers spreading out over the fine

comforter. It's so soft it doesn't feel real, smooth as silk, probably with a thread count higher than Will even thought possible.

He blows out a breath. "Beats a prison cell," he says. He doesn't mind that Hannibal is remaining behind – Hannibal is calming, and Will just had his fucking fingers inside him. They're…. They're friends. In whatever screwed up way you can call your psychiatrist and examiner and evaluator your friend.

"It certainly seems more comfortable, yes," Hannibal agrees with a nod. He meets Will's gaze, but Will can't hold it for long, and lowers his eyes to Hannibal's tie. "I'll be arranging for your clothes, and any other amenities you might need. I will also be purchasing a phone for you."

Will's brow creases. "Why?"

"Isolation is a killer as much as teeth and claws."

Will flinches, biting his lower lip. The open wardrobe bothers him, so he rises and closes the doors, the quiet 'click' echoing like a gunshot. "I feel compelled to thank you," he says. At Hannibal's curious hum, he turns and sets his sight on the Alpha's tie again. "For…stepping up, I guess. Not letting Cordell do the examination."

"I only did what I felt to be right," Hannibal replies. "You have shown me an overwhelming amount of trust, Will, and I would not betray that trust if I can."

Will presses his lips together, nods once. "I hope you never have to," he says, because it's all he feels like he can say.

"I want you to know that you can call on me for anything," Hannibal adds. "I will do my best to program the phone with Francis' number, as well as Jack's, Alana's, and my own. We are all here to help you, Will."

"I don't think that's true," Will replies darkly, turning away again. He sighs, closing his eyes, resting his forehead against the dark wood of the wardrobe. "Jack wants to put me behind bars. Francis can't do a damn thing to help me. Alana shouldn't try. And you…."

"And me," Hannibal repeats.

"The lady of the house hates Alphas, Hannibal," Will says. He feels like a Goddamn broken record, a parrot on repeat. "Any Alpha that gets close to me comes under threat."

Hannibal hums, and when Will looks at him again, he finds that Hannibal is smiling. It's faint, more a bulge of his cheeks and a light in his eyes than a true twist of his mouth, but he is smiling. "I suppose it's easier to think that, than the alternative."

Will frowns. "The alternative?"

"Is it possible that this woman is a manifestation of your guilt, Will? From what you have told me, you are drowning in it. It would be easy for a mind under so much stress to conjure

an apparition, to assuage those feelings." His head tilts. "Better to blame a foreign monster than come to terms with it yourself."

Will blinks at him, and pushes away from the wardrobe with a snarl, pointing an accusing finger Hannibal's way. "You said you thought I was innocent," he hisses.

"And I do," Hannibal replies. He doesn't seem concerned, not a little bit afraid at the show of Will's anger. Of course he wouldn't be – Omegas are sweet and all bark, no bite. And Will, malnourished and weak, would stand no chance against him in a physical fight. "But you said yourself; you lost your child, and Randall died the very next day. Is it *completely* impossible to think that, in some half-mad fever of grief and stress and loss, you used him as an outlet, and conjured this woman in your mind to deal with the aftermath?"

"And the other bodies?" Will snarls. "What about them?"

"A true mystery, I should think. But every puzzle has a solution."

Will stares, brought to a vicious sudden stop. His hands curl into tight fists, and that scream he's kept bottled up chokes the breath from him.

"*Leave*," he hisses.

Hannibal sighs through his nose, and gives Will a short, gracious nod. "Very well. I'll return with your belongings."

Will has to stay still. If he doesn't, he'll do something drastic, like throw a punch or beat the fucking smile from Hannibal's face. How *dare* he – he'd called Will as good as insane. How could he possibly do that, seeing what he has seen, knowing what he knows? The lady of the house isn't a fucking manifestation of anything Will made – she was there before he was, she has remained, after he left.

"Leave," he says again, vibrating with anger. Hannibal presses his lips together, and obeys, and Will sits down hard on the bed and buries his face in his hands once he's gone.

Will wakes to the sound of a door creaking open. He stiffens, his breath misting in the frigid air, clenches his eyes tightly shut and curls into as tight a ball as he can. *No*, how can she have possibly gotten to him here? The walls are so high, there are guards at the gates. There's too much clean here, nowhere for her to hide.

Except the wardrobe is large and mostly empty.

He folds his blankets tight around his head, curling in them so that he can peek out beneath and catch a sight of her. The blankets are thicker here, he's sweating but completely covered. She can't see him. Don't breathe, her sight is dependent on movement.

One single clawed finger curls around the slip of darkness in the open door. From within the slit, a red eye peers out. Will whimpers, and one finger becomes two, becomes three, the door easing open as her other hand curls out and her claws dig into the eye of a roaring lion on the wardrobe door. Will is shivering with fear, his skin clammy, his heart hammering – it feels worse, now, in this too-clean room. His neck is exposed, his body wide open. Fuck, *fuck*, she can probably smell him here because he's showered and cleaned, and the house can't protect him anymore.

One of her feet slides out from the open doors, landing on the floor with a loud *click*, and Will covers his ears and shuts his eyes as tight as he can. Tries to be perfectly still, but she's in his skull and in his belly and she knows he's here, he knows she knows.

She screams, so high-pitched a wail that it makes every bone in Will's body ache. It echoes and reverberates around his skull and he can't help it – he screams back. He lets what has built in his chest for days, weeks, *months*, build up and answer her in kind.

Strangely, it doesn't feel like a war cry. Rather, a wolf calling its pack member home.

She tears the blankets from his body and he kicks at her, because he's not going to let her get on top of him again. She snarls, jaw hanging too low, showing so many yellow and off-angle teeth. Her eyes, bleeding red and openly weeping, her stringy blonde hair spins around her in a flurry of grease and ash. Will flinches as one of her bloody tears lands on his cheek, and he reaches up to wipe it away.

She lunges for him, grabs his chin and slams him against the bathroom door, screaming in his face. "Where is he?" she demands. Her other hand is flat on Will's stomach, digging in so hard he feels his clothes part, tearing under her claws. Feels the sting of her splitting skin.

The sudden hot splash of his own blood makes him groan in relief, for his body is so cold. Blood is a brilliant reminder that you're alive. "Where is he?" she shrieks again.

Will shoves at her, her claws tearing through his jaw and leaving four long lines behind, from his cheek to his chin. "Not here," he snarls back at her. "He's not here."

She bares all of her teeth at him, and moans, tearing at her hair and shifting in place like he's watching some invisible man actively break every one of her bones. Her fingers curl back on themselves, her legs grow another joint. Her skin darkens, turns black in places, her hands and her cheeks and her legs where the shredded remains of her dress bares them, all of them are turning from the white pallor of a ghost to the black crisp of something burned and demonic.

"What are you?" Will whispers, eyes wide.

She blinks at him, as though shocked at the sound of his voice. Then, with another wail, she turns and stalks towards the door that leads to the hallway. Will watches, his heart in his throat, hardly daring to believe. It's not the first time something has distracted her from the final blow, and he should be grateful.

But Margot is in the house, and while the lady doesn't seem to have any particular hatred for women, she won't hesitate to kill Margot should she be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

He curses himself for his own protective nature – it's Omega, damn it, to a fault, to imprint and attach oneself. Devotion runs both ways, and Margot has risked so much for him, and if something happened to her it wouldn't end well for Will at all.

He opens the door, peering outside. He doesn't see any sign of her, but there's a drip of red on the floor.

Heart so high in his throat it chokes him, he swallows and follows the trail. Hannibal never returned with a phone and clothes for Will, maybe it's his way of punishing Will for telling him to leave – which was totally justified, in Will's opinion. How dare he accuse Will of conjuring the lady of the house – anyone can see her. Anyone might look outside their bedroom door and see her now.

But he has no way of calling anyone. Silence in the old house meant safety – he shouldn't draw attention to himself and earn her wrath again. He enters the main foyer, takes in a deep breath.

Tilts his head.

Listens.

There. A click of heels from the upper hallway. Will's spine feels as though it's made of ice and his feet are, for a moment, frozen to the floor. He can't go up there, that's where she lives. There's danger in that place. The basement is safe. The bodies and the ghosts they belonged to once will help him find food. Randall's down there, he'll keep Will safe.

Upstairs isn't safe. There are rotting beams and drips behind the walls, clusters of mold and mildew, decay and rot and disease. For a moment, nothing has changed, and Will is desperately searching for rats to eat while trying to keep his head down and out of sight.

He hears her, her heels and her rattling breath. Margot is up there, too. He has to make sure nothing happens to her.

Fists clenched and jaw aching, burning and dripping blood, Will ascends the stairs.

The upper floor is worse than the lower one. The frames holding the art on the walls probably cost more money than Will has ever seen in his life. There are suits of armor lining the walls, portraits of Vergers before, with the largest and most central being Mason. Clearly before he was wheelchair-bound.

A shadow moves, and Will's head snaps to one side, breath catching as he catches just a flutter of the lady's skirts as she prowls around the corner. The moonlight casts her shadow high on the wall like something out of a nightmare. She walks hunched, clawed hands held curled out in front of her, always reaching, her jaw open and gnawing on air.

He swallows, his torn cheek aching, and follows her. He doesn't know what room leads to where, doesn't know if she's even going in the direction of Margot's and Mason's rooms, but whatever she is here to do, he's sure it won't be good.

He rounds the corner, to find a small hollow leading to a single door. It stands wide open, cavernous and hungry, a tassel on the door swinging like a tongue licking over teeth. Will walks towards it, grabs the handle, peers inside.

It's a doctor's office. It's empty, except for a single medical bed. There's someone in the bed, tied down by their wrists and ankles, covered with a sheet so Will can't see their face. But the person is too large to be Margot, too tall to be Mason.

The lady passes by the door with a snarl, and Will flinches back so hard he collides with one of the suits of armor, sending it crashing to the ground.

Her head snaps back like her neck is broken, her eyes wild and red as she stares at him through the open slit of the door. Will shivers in place, prone and hands stinging from trying to grab for purchase on the jutting pieces of the armor. Every inch of him trembles under the weight of her stare.

She stares at him, blinks at him, and then reaches out with one clawed hand. Not stretching, to tear and hurt him. Upturned, like an offering.

Will runs. He scrambles to his feet and flees down the hallway towards the stairs, heart pounding so loud in his ears he doesn't hear the heavy footfalls of pursuit behind him until a meaty body collides with his own, far too large and warm to be the lady's body. It sends him crashing to the ground and he gasps, torn cheek ripped further by the carpet, hands burned by the sudden stop. A snarl echoes in his head, and he's not sure which one of them makes it.

The body on him smells familiar, plastic and latex and sharp cleaner scent, but it doesn't move like a normal body. Each twitch and jerk is like a carcass getting electrocuted, but the body is heavy and plastered over him like a giant weight.

A hand snaps around his throat, and Will gasps, choking around his own air. There's pressure, claws tearing at his throat and at his clothes, and he whimpers as a set of sharp teeth part and settle themselves on the nape of his neck.

"Shh. Hush." It sounds like Randall, and then like Hannibal, and then like no one at all. Will clenches his eyes shut, grits his teeth. "Where is he?"

Will shakes his head. He can't speak, the hand around his throat is too tight.

There's a hand raking deep lines into his thigh. Then up. Then *in* -.

Oh, it's *warm*. It's warm and wet and stinks of iron. He shudders, moaning, there's so much pressure in his chest and he needs to let it out. He claws at his own chest, leans down and

finds warm, wet flesh. Ruts his teeth until he feels bone. He moans at the taste, smiling at the sound of the poor, whimpering little thing stuck beneath him.

"Shh," he whispers. "Hush." His voice is not his own. It's everyone's and no one's. So sweet, it's so sweet, *hush, pretty thing, I'll take care of you*. He drags his nails – claws, he has claws – over open flesh and drinks down the pretty thing's sweet cries as it trembles and shakes beneath him.

Claws tear at the carpet. Then they become hands. Then his own hands are human, and then they are not. His hair is long and short and thin and wild, straight and curling, wet and straw-dry. His jaws snap open wide and he bites down, tears out a chunk of flesh as his other hand opens up the lovely thing's belly.

"Are you hungry?" he croons. "I'm hungry."

He's sweating, and so is the pretty thing caught beneath him. So sweet and warm and dripping wet. He purrs, nuzzling through ripped, bloody flesh. *You'll make such a good home for me, won't you?* He bites again, until he feels more bone, tongues and strips cartilage from joints, myelin from nerves. The pretty thing beneath him whines and pleas, begging wordlessly. So open, so *warm*, oh, *divine*….

He takes a strip of flesh between delicate lips and peels it off, swallowing it like a snake. Delicious, it tastes just perfect. Sweet with pain and surrender, the capsaicin spice of an Alpha. Warms his bones and makes him strong. His hands float between skeletal and human, knuckles embedded with blood, it's soaked into his hair.

He snarls, and shoves his hand to the nape of the pretty thing's neck, forces it down to the ground. There is nothing but them in the wide, wide world. Predator and prey. Father and mother. He leans down again, takes another bite, kisses the bared, pulsing red flesh that is revealed once he cracks free a rib and reveals the rabbit-pulse heart.

He reaches into his own chest, where his heart is so large and so heavy, causing too much pressure. It grew too big for him. He tears it out, and slips it into the open wound, smiling as the pretty thing whimpers and goes still beneath him. His heart will wind around the too-small one that was here. It will make the pretty thing strong.

He pets through short, soaking-wet hair, kisses the lovely thing's nape, and smiles wide. He purrs, nuzzling, wrapping his arms around the trembling, soaked body pinned beneath him. "I'll keep you safe," he promises. "Until I find him."

Will surges awake with a gasp, clawing at his chest, for it feels too tight and hollow and stuffed full at the same time. He heaves, rolling to the side of the bed and vomiting up the contents of his stomach. It's all red, bright and glistening. He's soaked through with sweat, and the mattress is dripping wet with it, but that's not all there is.

He's slick. He's soaking wet and wide, wide open. He whimpers helplessly, his heart hammering in his chest, blood on his tongue and he can smell it, he can smell it, oh fuck, what the *fuck* did he do?

He rolls onto his stomach, biting down on his pillow. It's too soft, it's not warm enough, but it's wet and tastes like salt. He tears through it, a burst of stuffing drying out his mouth, ruts his body down onto his mattress and feels a flutter in his stomach, empty, so empty, feels a flood leak from him as he comes and shoves his face to the pillow to muffle his scream.

It's relentless, it doesn't end. He tears through the mattress until he reveals springs, cuts his hands on the sharp tines of them. Grips and groans and *shoves* himself into it, aching for friction, for more, more, always so hungry. He's *starving*, and he can't stop the rough, animal noises that claw their way from his chest and out from the gaps between his canines.

He tears at his own hair and smears blood across his cheeks. His jaw hurts from biting, he's leaving smears of blood on the sheets and the mattress, he can't stop rutting, needing in, needing to be *inside*. His clothes are too tight on his body and he snarls, ripping at them with a strength that would surprise him if he were in a clear enough mindset to notice.

Where is he? a voice wails in his head. *Where is he?*

"Who?" Will moans, clenching his eyes tightly shut, another surge of something too animal to be called pleasure running down his spine and causing him to leak more slick, staining his thighs, the mattress so wet he can hear the drip of it from beneath. Or maybe it's blood. Or maybe it's fucking urine, he doesn't know, he has no idea, there's too much noise in his head and too many clothes on him, too much heat, too *much* -.

The door to his room slams open and Will snarls, loudly, turns his head and blindly snaps at whatever reaches for him. No, don't touch him, don't fucking touch him -.

"Will."

A hand goes to the nape of his neck and grabs *hard*.

Will gasps, trembling, wrangled by wet sheets, blood on his hands, in his hair, smeared across his jaw. He blinks, blinks again, vision snapping into focus so fast it makes him dizzy. Sees a man, who solidifies into familiar features.

"Will," Hannibal whispers again.

The look in his eyes speaks volumes, but in a language Will doesn't know. "She was here," he rasps.

Hannibal presses his lips together. He doesn't release Will's neck, which is probably a good thing, because Will feels the need to move building in him like a tidal wave, an elastic band slowly stretching, stretching, until it gives; snap or release. Hannibal's fingers gravitate to Will's racing pulse, his brows lowering in concern.

He breathes out. "There's been an incident."

Of course there has.

"I didn't do it."

Hannibal sighs. He looks to the puddle of vomit Will left behind, nostrils flaring. It smells like meat, it smells like Alpha.

"Cordell is dead."

Will closes his eyes. Of course he is.

"She killed him," he says.

"I'm not sure Jack is going to see it that way."

"I didn't do it, Hannibal," Will says again. "She did."

Hannibal looks like a man about to sentence someone to death. His expression is drawn, his eyes dark. He pets his thumb down the tense tendon in Will's neck and Will shivers full-body. Hannibal's nostrils flare; the room reeks of Will's slick, of his sweat, of his blood. There's red under his nails and painted across his knuckles.

Another tremor runs down his spine, a helpless whimper escaping him. He still *needs*, feels empty and too-full all at once. He wants to move, needs to move, needs to run and find something wet and warm to bury his teeth into. The desires don't feel like his own, but they have to be his own. There's no one else they could be.

He closes his eyes, sighs heavily. "I guess that's it, then."

Hannibal, tentatively, releases his nape in increments, until he's sure Will isn't going to attack him again. Will rolls onto his back. His shirt is torn to shreds, but he clearly didn't make it to getting the rest of his clothes off, and the stubborn sheet clings to what semblance of modesty he can maintain. He looks up at the ceiling, eyes burning, until he closes them.

"Will," Hannibal says gently, and Will hums. "I'm going to need to take dental imprints from you. And test this blood to see if it's all yours."

Will sighs. "Gonna shove your fingers in me again to test that, too?" he asks.

He can feel Hannibal's surprise at the question, without looking.

"Something triggered this…." He gestures vaguely down at himself. It's not heat, he's too clear-headed for it to be heat, but it feels pretty damn close. Even now, with Hannibal watching him, he has to fight the urge to shove a hand between his legs and try to sate the howling emptiness inside him. "Sounds like something Mason's gonna want to *test*."

"He doesn't need to know about this," Hannibal says, and Will opens his eyes, slants them Hannibal's way. "I'll get you some Neutral, to stay the effects. If it's not a true heat, it will abate, and if you are prompt with laundry, no one need be the wiser."

Will blinks, but offers no protest. He's so fucking tired.

"Is Jack here?" he asks.

"No," Hannibal replies. "Mason called me, first. He seems to think you and I have a special relationship." Will huffs a laugh, and Hannibal smiles thinly. "Mason is the kind of man who would rather not stir up a fuss when there's no need."

"I think a suspected murderer moving in and then a body turning up counts as a fuss, Doctor."

"It's my professional opinion that Mason is absolutely delighted by that possibility," Hannibal replies, his smile widening just a fraction. "And you are not convicted of anything yet."

Will hums, running a hand through his soaking-wet hair. He grimaces at the feeling of so many fluids drying on his fever-warm skin, clinging and tacky to every inch of him. He sits up, and Hannibal scoots back to give him room to pull his knees up. He wraps his arms around them.

"She came to me last night," Will tells him, their eyes meeting. Hannibal's head tilts. "I know you think she's just a manifestation of my guilt – which I'm still not over you suggesting, by the way – but…. I don't think you're entirely wrong." Hannibal's expression doesn't change, but his eyes brighten in intrigue. "She's tied to me, somehow. I feel like -."

He stops. He doesn't know how to tell Hannibal about what it had felt like, what he'd experienced, without sounding completely batshit insane.

"I feel like she's got a plan for me."

Hannibal gives a considering hum. Will can tell he has theories about that particular statement. "I'm not accusing you, Will, but I find it interesting that Cordell died the same day he attempted to invade your body without your permission."

Will swallows tightly. "You invaded me," he replies, stomach twisting when Hannibal's lips turn down in a subtle frown. "With as much consent as I could give, I'm not -. I'm not angry about that, not specifically, just vaguely, at the laws and the state of the world. But I don't blame you, and I'm grateful that you were there."

Hannibal nods, jaw clenching, and turns his face away. He sighs.

"If she is trying to protect you, to save you for something, then it makes sense that Cordell paid the price for threatening you," he muses aloud. "Unfortunately, that also means motive."

"Yeah," Will breathes, shaking his head. He runs his hands through his hair, wincing as his fingers tangle with the snarls and knots trapped within it. He had less of a problem with this when his hair was dirty and too long. Strange how cleanliness brings him so much more discomfort than being dirty did.

Hannibal stands. "First things first; I will fetch you a Neutral shot, and you will gather your bedclothes and everything else and set to cleaning them," he says.

Will frowns. "What about evidence?" he asks.

"I will take it before you shower," Hannibal tells him. "I'd advise you not to do anything to contaminate it, until I do. Just make a pile for the laundry for now, and I will return shortly."

Will blinks up at him. "Hannibal," he says, and Hannibal pauses, one hand on the door. "Why are you helping me? You can't deny that I'm dangerous – not actively, I didn't kill anyone, but people keep dropping like flies around me."

Hannibal is silent, and still, for a moment. Then, his shoulders drop, and he sighs, and turns to fix Will with a look that is strangely dark.

"Do as you're told, Will," he says sharply, and Will gasps, eyes widening as he hears the strain of Alpha in Hannibal's voice, compelling obedience. He's on his feet before he thinks about it, trembling and hunched, panting and dizzy at getting upright so fast. "I'll be back in just a moment."

The effects of his influence last until the door closes behind him, and Will breathes out suddenly, harsh and heavy. He grimaces, growling, petting over the nape of his neck which still stings from Hannibal's touch. Not just that, but -.

He pauses, feeling over his nape again. There are welts, there. Tender and fresh and smarting like an open wound.

Hannibal would have felt them, too. Would have seen them.

He turns to look at the wardrobe door. It's standing open, and there are nail marks marring the intricate carvings. The lion's eyes have been ripped out.

A shudder runs through him, but Hannibal's order echoes like a claxon in his head. He turns, yanking the sheets from the bed, pulling his clothes off and realizing a second too late that he doesn't have any fresh ones to change into.

He sighs to himself, scrubbing his hands over his face, and turns, seeing a suitcase that had been set by the door. Hannibal must have brought it with him, and dropped it when he caught sight of Will. Will goes to it, turning it on its back and opening it, sighing with relief when he sees fresh clothes, a toothbrush and toothpaste, and shower gel and shampoo inside.

He pulls on a fresh set of clothes, grimacing when he stands and is reminded that, despite the clothes, his skin is still very much stained and he would benefit from a shower if he doesn't want to walk around smelling like a Goddamn heat lodge. Hopefully Hannibal lets him shower after he takes his samples.

Hopefully, Mason's curiosity wins out, and he doesn't call Jack. Whatever is happening, whatever the fuck happened last night, Will didn't do it. He *knows* he didn't do it – he can't overpower a beast like Cordell, not on his best day.

But *she* could have.

The thought causes his stomach to tense, a tremor running down his spine, his body open and raw, another bead of slick leaking out of him. He shudders in revulsion, and does his best to ignore it.

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry for the wait, my darlings. I hope you like this chapter.
Dedicated to thequietscribe, thank you for helping me with my friend <3

Hannibal returns between one breath and the next. Will doesn't dare sit back on his bed, he doesn't want the blood and slick stains to seep into his clothing, but his body is providing plenty of that. There's blood in a wide macabre smile across his belly, and his thighs are so wet he can feel them chafing as he paces.

The door opens, and Will freezes. Hannibal enters with his medical bag, and goes to the bed, setting it down on a clean spot without hesitation. From the bag, he pulls a small plastic container, which he opens to remove what looks like putty.

He turns, and meets Will's eyes. "Open your mouth," he commands. Will does, wincing when his torn cheek and jaw stings in protest. Hannibal gently fits the wad of plasticine between his teeth, fingertips brushing feather light over Will's jaw and neck. Will shudders, and bites down, and Hannibal removes the piece when he's done.

"Are those admissible in court?" Will asks.

"We'll cross that bridge when we get to it," Hannibal answers, which is not an answer at all.

Will sighs.

"Tell me what happened."

"I don't even know how to describe it."

The look Hannibal gives him is one of subtly warning; a parent telling his child with a look that if they intend to lie, it better be a damn good one. His eyes flash, briefly, to Will's face, to his mouth, and he nods to the cuts on his cheek. "Did she do that?"

"Yes," Will replies. Hannibal gathers more Q-tips and swabs, and approaches Will. He lifts one of Will's hands and takes samples from beneath his nails, from his palms, from the clotting mess on his face. He does it with neither hesitation nor disregard; his touch is gentle, but not wary of frightening Will. Like he knows Will has no reason to be afraid of him.

Perhaps Will doesn't, but still, he shakes.

"She came out of the wardrobe," Will says, nodding to it. Hannibal's eyes see what she did; the torn-out eyes of the lion and the ragged claw marks in the wood are impossible to miss.

"She came to me, and she was -. She was looking for someone. She kept asking me where 'he' was." Will shakes his head.

"Was she looking for Randall, perhaps?" Hannibal muses. "Or Francis? Or Cordell?"

"I don't know," Will snaps. "We're not exactly friendly."

Hannibal's lips twitch into one of his not-smiles. Wordlessly, he gestures for Will to continue.

"I told her 'he' wasn't here, and she left the room. I was afraid she'd go after Margot, so I followed her upstairs." Hannibal's expression tells Will that he already is aware enough to know that the murder took place in the upper halls. He wonders who found the body; Esther, or Margot, or Mason himself? Who called Hannibal?

"And that is when she…attacked Cordell?" Hannibal prompts.

Will swallows, and shakes his head. "I don't know what happened," he confesses. At Hannibal's frown, he shrugs helplessly. "It was like…. She was chasing me, and then it wasn't her, and then I was the one hurting someone, and then it wasn't me, and I…."

Hannibal's gaze lowers to the blood lightly staining Will's shirt. "Did she do that, too?"

"Yes."

Hannibal sighs. "You must understand how this is going to look, Will."

"I know," Will says, short and sharp and utterly helpless. "I fucking know! I just -." He wraps his fingers in his hair. It's too short, too clean. Blood has crusted in his hair, clumping it together, he hates it. He hates being this clean and in a room this nice, it's not natural. Their kind came from the mud and primordial ooze; that is where they should be.

"Did it arouse you?"

Will flinches. He knows why Hannibal is asking, his body is certainly *aroused*, but the idea of getting off on that terrible nightmare fills him with new revulsion. If his stomach had anything more to empty, he's sure he'd be adding to the puddle of drying vomit on the floor.

"*No*," he snarls. "If anything, that," he gestures to the stain of slick on the bed, "is your fault."

Hannibal tilts his head curiously.

"You put your fingers in me," Will hisses. "You scruffed me. You had to know that could have potentially caused a reaction."

"Not one this powerful," Hannibal says. Whether he's trying to be reassuring, or simply stating fact, Will can't tell.

He glares down at the floor and wraps his arms around himself. "Can I shower now?"

"Yes. Take some clean clothes and a towel. I will take samples from the bed, and when you've returned I will treat your wounds."

Will flushes, and nods. He takes another set of clothes from the suitcase Hannibal provided, and a towel from the wardrobe.

He hesitates at the door. "Does Cordell's body have any defensive wounds?" he asks.

"Yes," Hannibal replies. "I'll be tasked with seeing if the blood beneath his nails matches yours. If it does…."

He doesn't need to finish the sentence. Will nods to himself, and leaves the room, and enters the bathroom. It is a nice room, though understated from the rest of the house like his bedroom is. The shower is a nozzle jutting from the white tile wall, angled to pour into a large, claw-footed tub. It's big enough to drown in.

He tries not to think about it.

He strips, wincing when he catches sight of himself in the mirror. He certainly looks like a murderer, with blood all through his hair, staining his face, his chest, his belly. He looks like he's been to Hell and back, sleepless nights coloring the skin beneath his eyes bruise-black. Maybe he is in Hell, he thinks, doomed to forever be tormented by the lady of the house.

The water comes out steaming hot and beats down on his shoulders like fists. He sighs, angling his face away from the harsh spray. He forgot to take the shampoo and shower gel Hannibal brought him, but there are bottles here for guests, which he uses. His nose wrinkles at the overly-floral scents, but at least it will cover up the scent of blood and slick, if he's still leaking.

Thankfully, the empty sensation, the ragged, raw need to hunt and be filled, faded after Hannibal left the room. Now, he feels hollow, in a dead and defeated way. He feels like he's about to take his last meal; this is it. If he's found guilty of Cordell's murder, one way or another, it's going to buy him a one-way ticket to the chair. Even if he gets a good lawyer and relies on the grace of the jury, and his status as an Omega, he'll probably get life in some facility for 'damaged' Omegas. Ones that are not fit for society. There are more of them than one might think. Not even one hundred years ago, something as simple as exercising free will and being anything but an obedient fucktoy for one's mate could get an Omega sent to the madhouse.

Willful disobedience, as great a sin as murder.

He sighs to himself, scrubbing blood off his skin and from his hair. He washes his hands until they ache, and the water is pink for far too long a time. He stays in the shower until it runs clear, and it might have been an hour or a day before that happens.

He can't stay in here forever. He wouldn't put it past Hannibal to come looking for him, if he did.

He gets out of the shower, turns it off, and towels his hair from wet to damp. He thinks he's stopped leaking, it's hard to tell, but the notion brings relief. He doesn't want to be stinking up the place with his weird preheat not-heat scent. Mason is an Alpha, after all, and so is Hannibal. He doesn't want either of them smelling him like that.

He finishes drying himself off and hangs his towel on a hook on the back of the door. He leaves, and goes back into his bedroom.

He halts, by the threshold. Hannibal has cleaned his entire room. He can no longer see the pile of stripped sheets and sullied clothes, the puddle of vomit has been cleaned up. Aside from the stains on the mattress, nothing looks amiss.

Hannibal turns to him, and gives him a kind, encouraging smile. He gestures to the bed. "May I look at your wounds?"

Will's cheek stings and his stomach aches, as he nods and sits where Hannibal pointed. He lifts his shirt and leans back, and Hannibal's eyes widen a fraction in surprise.

"Will," he breathes. He steps close, between Will's knees. Will presses his lips together and tries not to think about the position, but can't help how he shivers when Hannibal's warm hand flattens above the cuts on his belly. They look like perfect nail marks, four of them, so deep that he can't breathe without them aching. Still, they aren't bleeding as heavily as their depth suggests.

Hannibal tilts his head to one side, frowning in something like confusion. "These appear slightly cauterized," he notes. Will frowns. "Burned. It might be why they're not bleeding as much as they should be."

"She was made of ash, partially," Will replies. "She's looked somewhat burned since the house."

Hannibal says nothing, to that. He turns and takes out a large bandage from his bag, the kind used more to keep a sore joint in place than to stymy blood flow. He peels the tape from the back and gently places it over Will's wound, smoothing down the edges with a touch so light, Will barely feels it.

Then, he straightens, and helps Will sit upright. He tuts, lightly thumbing at the corner of Will's mouth. "These are burned too," he says, soft with awe. Maybe that's why they sting so badly. "I'm hesitant to suggest stitches."

"You're the doctor," Will replies.

Hannibal hums, and nods. He takes another bandage like the first, and cuts it into pieces, so that he can individually cover the claw marks on Will's face. Will already knows they're going to be a bitch to remove. He fights the urge to scratch at the edges of them.

Then, Hannibal sighs quietly, and says, very delicately; "Do you require a cup? Or a tampon?"

Will flinches, hissing in a breath when it causes the muscles in his stomach to clench severely. His face hurts when he grits his teeth. "No," he replies, shaking his head. "I don't think I'm…affected anymore."

Hannibal nods, accepting that. "I still have Neutral, if you want it."

"Probably a good idea," Will says. Hannibal nods again, and takes a long, thin syringe from his bag. He uncaps the needle and Will hikes up the sleeve of his t-shirt to bare his shoulder. Hannibal pinches the skin of his upper arm, the meaty part at the back, and slides the needle in, pressing down on the plunger. Immediately, ice floods Will's veins, making him shiver. He's never taken Neutral before, but he knows it's meant to stay the effects of a heat or rut, to buy time for the sufferer to get someplace safe. He imagines, if he were in heat for real, it would feel awful. Right now he has no room in him to pay much attention to it at all.

He hears rushing footsteps down the hall, a moment before Margot appears in the open doorway, her eyes wide and face pale. "Will," she breathes, and goes to him. She reaches for his face, hesitating when she sees the bandages. Her eyes flash to Hannibal, almost accusatory. "Are you alright?"

Will wants to laugh. Instead he says, "I didn't kill him."

Margot swallows harshly. "I believe you."

Will wishes he could believe *her*.

"So," Hannibal sighs, "Mason did call Jack?"

She nods. "He just arrived," she replies. "He's taking in the scene in the upper hallway. What happened?"

"It was the lady," Will tells her. "I know Jack won't believe me, but it was."

"I've already taken samples from Will, and Cordell," Hannibal says coolly, capping the used shot of Neutral and placing it back into his bag. "I will happily surrender all of that evidence to Agent Crawford, on his request."

Will frowns.

"Do you think it'll match?" Margot asks, voice low with worry. "I won't let you turn Will in."

Will's frown deepens. She is, still, protecting him. He has no claim to her protection.

"It is the law, Miss Verger," Hannibal says. "Believe me, I wouldn't comply if I thought Jack was going to find anything to put Will away." He looks to Will, meets his eyes, and says; "I am more convinced now than ever of Will's innocence."

Margot nods sharply. "I'll see if I can buy us some time," she says, "but Jack will want to interview you, Will."

"I understand," Will replies. She nods again, and scurries from the room like a rat fleeing the light.

Hannibal closes his bag, and Will grabs his wrist, gripping it tightly. "Why?" he demands. "Not even yesterday you were accusing me of killing people and inventing the woman as a proxy, as an excuse. What changed your mind?"

"Do you want my honest answer?" Hannibal asks.

"Of course I do."

He nods. He doesn't seem to mind that Will is still holding onto him, like Will has the power to make him stay, or fight him. Will doesn't, he knows that – he's not well fed and he's weak from his time in the house, and so sleep-deprived his entire body trembles with exhaustion. He is no threat to Hannibal, and yet.

"Your wounds are not consistent with self-infliction," Hannibal tells him. "Which leads me to believe that you were, in fact, attacked. By Cordell, or this woman, you were attacked, which means as far as I'm concerned, any reaction you had was made in self-defense. Therefore, you are innocent."

Will doesn't know why he expected a different answer. It still hits him like a blow. He makes a bitter sound and releases Hannibal's wrist. "Right. So you don't think I didn't kill him, but that I was justified in doing so, if I did."

"I also don't think you could take down a brute like Cordell on your own," Hannibal continues. "And I don't believe you are foolish enough to immediately attack someone your first night here."

Right. Will is innocent because he's not stupid enough to be guilty. His mouth twists into a grimace and he looks down at his feet. "What happens when Jack decides that I did this?" he rasps.

"I believe there is a course of action that is obvious," Hannibal says. Will frowns, and looks up at him. "You claim that, in the night, while you are asleep, or alone, this woman manifests and does grievous harm to you and others. Clearly, the next necessary step is to prove whether you are not simply mad. We can place you under supervision while you sleep. If she appears to you, we will know that there is more to this case than meets the eye."

Will laughs. It's hysterical and high and comes out more like a sob. "You want to *meet* her?" he demands.

"Will," Hannibal sighs. "If she is real, then she is real. If she's not, then a complex psychological and physiological anomaly is happening, with you at its epicenter. It is impossible to prove that something does not exist." He smiles. "I want to scan your brain, and then observe you, for however long it takes until you have another…experience. Then, I will be able to tell Jack my observations and he can adjust his case accordingly."

"She'll kill you," Will hisses. "She hates Alphas. She'll kill you."

"Then I suppose that will prove things anyway," Hannibal replies, shrugging. "If she is not real, and it is you acting under the influence of a damaged mind, then my death will be everything Jack needs to put you behind bars for good."

"Why the *fuck* would I agree to that?" Will snarls. He pushes himself to his feet, pacing away. "Either way I'm screwed! If she kills you, then you die, and I'm *completely* fucked. If it's not real, then that means…."

No, she's real. Will knows she's real. The alternative is unthinkable. He's not fucking *crazy*.

He makes another sound, hard and crashing against the back of his teeth. "I guess I don't have a choice, though, do I?"

"Of course you have a choice, Will," Hannibal replies. He sounds offended that Will might think otherwise. Such is the privilege of being an Alpha; they are allowed to know what decisions they truly make out of free will and desire. For Omegas, it's more often the lesser of two evils.

Will swallows, and turns. He can see Hannibal's silhouette in the corner of his eye, but his head is angled towards the wardrobe. Though the lion is missing its eyes, it is screaming still. In pain, perhaps, or triumph. He can hear the woman's wailing echoing in his head.

"I don't want her to hurt you," Will whispers.

Hannibal sighs. His shadow approaches, and Will doesn't flinch, doesn't fight, as he feels gentle fingers curl through his wet hair. Hannibal's scent is soothing, like meat roasting on an open fire, and cigar smoke, and whiskey. Things that flood Will's mouth with saliva and made his shoulders loosen in anticipation of a warm meal and good company.

Hannibal cradles the back of his skull and Will lets his head drop to the Alpha's shoulder, sighing, even though the pressure against his injured cheek stings. Hannibal's jaw brushes against his temple. His pulse is steady and slow. He's calm, he has no fear in him at all. Will doesn't remember what that feels like.

"Before I suggest it to Jack," Hannibal says after a while, "it would make me feel better, to have your informed consent. If you don't want to come with me, I won't bring it up at all."

Will blinks, brow creasing. He pushes closer to Hannibal in answer, seeking more of that calm. Hannibal's arm is around his, a light weight against his shoulders, up his spine until it ends with Hannibal's hand in his hair.

"I'm so tired of being afraid," he murmurs. In answer, Hannibal merely hums, and cradles Will's hair back from his ear, nails so light. An Omega's neck is sensitive, that's no secret. Will can't remember the last time he was touched this much by someone other than Randall. Or Francis, he supposes, he's certainly tactile. But not like this.

"At the risk of oversimplifying it, or having you laugh at me again," Hannibal begins, and sighs; "You don't need to be afraid, with me."

"Fear is instinctual," Will argues, ignoring the way his sore stomach tenses *hard* at Hannibal's voice so close to his ear. "I can't help whether I feel it or not."

Hannibal nods, and tilts his head to briefly nuzzle Will's hair. He breathes in and Will tenses, pushing away. "Don't do that," he snaps. "Don't scent-mark me."

Hannibal, to his credit, looks suitably chastised. The hand that was in Will's hair flexes as he lets it fall to his side. "Forgive me," he replies. "It's…instinctual."

Will turns away, wrapping his arms around his torso. He immediately regrets it, as it pulls on his sore stomach, but he doesn't want Hannibal to get concerned again. He doesn't want to think about how nice it had felt, even for so short a time, to feel so settled.

"I don't want to pressure you, Will, but you didn't answer my question."

Will closes his eyes, and sighs heavily. "If Jack agrees, I'll go with you," he says. He doesn't want to stay here, for a myriad of reasons. He doesn't like Mason, he doesn't want to put Margot and Alana at risk, and he hates how clean and fancy it is here. Though, judging by Hannibal's impeccable dress and bearing, he's sure the Alpha lives just as comfortably.

Hannibal has the decency to look pleasantly surprised, at least, like Will's decision was a free one. His smile is warm and wide, and Will pointedly ignores how his belly gets heavy at the sight of it, how the nape of his neck burns. How much he wants to sink back into Hannibal's arms and let everything else fade away.

He clears his throat, and lifts his chin. "Shall we?"

Hannibal inclines his head, and gestures towards the door. "After you."

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Esther brings them all breakfast in the main living room where Will signed away his soul to the Vergers. There are scrambled eggs and a large pile of toast, and coffee and tea. There are scones with more jams and jellies than Will thought existed. He's not hungry in the slightest, but forces himself to eat, mostly because Hannibal insists that he won't give Will any painkillers unless he has some food in his belly.

Will knows Jack is in the house, not just because Margot said as much. The tension in the air is so thick it could be cut with a shitty airport knife. Alana and Margot are in the room with him and Hannibal, their faces pale and notably drawn with concern. Alana keeps staring at Will, though trying to make it look like she isn't.

Will swallows his mouthful, and says, "I didn't kill Cordell."

Alana visibly startles at his words, and then she frowns. "I believe you," she says. Will has to hand it to both of them – they are certainly good at sounding sincere. He wishes he could believe them.

"The evidence against me is staggering," he says instead.

"You're not a killer, Will," Alana says, with a conviction Will envies. "I know you didn't do this."

Hannibal stirs, by Will's side. "I intend to propose that Will be surrendered to my care for monitoring," he says. "I've already received consent from Will, and I hope to convince Jack that he would be better attempting concrete evidence than a wild goose chase that may ultimately prove fruitless. I hope you both understand my intention, as well."

Margot sighs. "I wish it didn't have to be that way," she says. She has one leg folded over the other, and sits back on the couch, fingers laced and resting in her lap. Her eyes are on Will, and she looks so deeply apologetic. "I asked Mason to destroy that estate years ago. We have no use for it; it's just taking up space that we could have used for our business. But he insisted we keep it up. If it wasn't there, none of this would be happening."

"Evil finds a way," Will says darkly, taking another slice of toast. He wasn't hungry, and he still isn't, but he registers absently that his stomach is empty, and the food is welcome.

Will's head tilts as he hears footsteps approaching. The door opens, and Jack and Mason come in. Mason is being wheeled by Esther, who positions him at the head of the coffee table, between the two couches, and takes her leave with a small bow of her head. Jack's expression is thunderous, a subtle ring of red shining in his eyes that matches Mason's.

"Well," Mason says, with a sharp look Will's way, "it appears that some people don't appreciate hospitality anymore."

Will winces, and sets his teeth on edge. "I didn't kill Cordell," he says, and wonders how many more times he will have to say it before anyone truly believes him. "I have no reason to. Why would I do it?"

Jack hums. "I've been told that Cordell made an unwelcome advance on you during your examination," he says. Will swallows, and glares down at his shaking hands. "Mild though it was," he adds.

Mason scoffs. "If Alphas have started getting the death penalty for being a little flirty, we'd all be in the ground," he says, his nasal voice high and cutting. Will flinches again, stomach tense. He resists the urge to touch it – he doesn't know if Jack knows the extent of his injuries, and he doesn't want to draw too much attention to them.

"There was a fight," Jack says. "Whatever happened, he didn't go down easily." His eyes are on the bandages on Will's cheek and jaw.

"It was the lady," Will spits. "She's strong. She killed him."

Jack sighs. "Will, this doesn't look good for you," he says. He has the decency to look somewhat guilty about that, but Will doesn't want his guilt. He just wants someone to fucking *believe him*. Surely, he thinks, surely there is proof. Francis' team had video footage, and there was a camera on the grounds, and then in his jail cell – surely she showed up *somewhere*?

"Jack, I'd like to propose something, before you decide to arrest Will," Hannibal says, sitting forward. Will closes his eyes. "I believe that your case hinges on the need for proof. If there is evidence that Will was physically involved in Cordell's murder, then that evidence is certainly damning. But I would be remiss if I didn't suggest we also consider the alternative."

Will opens his eyes to see Jack frowning. "What do you suggest, Doctor?" he asks. Of course he's willing to listen to Hannibal, because Hannibal is an Alpha and a doctor and he's *respected*. He's not some street rat without a penny to his name and dozens of bodies left in his wake.

"I would like to take Will with me," Hannibal says. "I have facilities in my home that can monitor Will during his sleep. Since this lady only seems to appear at night, when he is alone and unguarded, I believe that I will be able to set up and monitor his brain patterns while he sleeps, and bear witness to any actual anomalies that happen during her appearance." Hannibal pauses, as though for dramatic effect. "I already have Margot's and Will's consent for the experiment."

Mason laughs scornfully. "And what of the debt he owes me?"

"I will pay it in full," Hannibal says without hesitating a beat. Will's eyes widen, and he looks to Hannibal in question. The Alpha is smiling. "It's no trouble."

"You can't do that," Will protests, shaking his head. "No. I can't let you do that."

"What I choose to do with my finances is not your concern, Will," Hannibal says, with a subtle, amused edge to his voice. He meets Jack's eyes. "If you don't intend to arrest him yet, or if I can convince you at all, I ask that you allow me to perform this study, so that we can determine once and for all the nature of these visions that are plaguing Will's mind."

Will can't believe what he's hearing. He knew Hannibal intended to take him away, but the thought of *buying* him, it's like he's essentially being sold off to marriage. Which is an archaic practice, but still one most of the world takes part in.

"What do you say?" Hannibal presses, when Jack is silent.

Jack presses his lips together, considering that. "I can consider it," he says, nodding once. "But if the lab confirms that Will was involved with Cordell's murder, my hands are tied."

Hannibal nods. "I understand."

"You'll have a few days, at least," Jack says, and looks to Mason. "If you're agreeable."

Mason's eyes are sharp and narrowed on Will's face. Will has always had trouble holding the gaze of an Alpha, one of the many joys that an Omega's status brings them, but it's especially difficult now. Being talked over and bartered for like a piece of meat isn't something he has ever wanted.

Then, Mason's eyes slide to Hannibal. His torn lips twitch into an unkind smile. "I'll need reparations for Cordell's death, too," he croons.

Hannibal doesn't visibly react, except to nod. "Whatever amount you deem fair."

Will flinches, and sucks in a breath.

"Well, then! I suppose that's that," Mason says, dusting his hands off as though ridding them of dirt. Because that's what Will is – an inconvenience, a liability. Something to be cast aside and scraped off like gum from a shoe. "I'll call the lawyer over to draw up a contract releasing us of any claim to Will, and of course, the monetary compensation."

"I'll sign it," Hannibal promises. "In the meantime, I'd like to get Will settled. It's a long drive to my home."

Settled, like Will is a stray animal being taken home from the pound. He glares down at his knees and barely registers Jack and Mason nodding in agreement. He doesn't react as Hannibal puts a hand on his shoulder and passes by him, probably to speak with Jack about all the samples and the crime scene and everything else that is going to send Will to jail for the rest of his life.

He reaches out for another piece of toast, and bites into it as Alana circles the table to sit beside him. Margot leaves the room, wheeling her brother out to join the other Alphas.

"If you need someone to talk to," she says, and offers him her card. He takes it on auto-pilot, because refusing it gets him nowhere. He has to be silent and play nice and stop getting himself into fucking trouble. She sighs when he remains quiet, and puts her hand on his shoulder, just as Hannibal did. Maybe that's one of the moves they teach therapists. Physical touch does wonders for building trust and mimicking pack bonds. "I know things are crazy right now, and I know you might not care about what I say or think, but you can trust Hannibal."

He stops chewing, at that, and swallows harshly. His eyes are on the slightly reflective surface of the breakfast tray. In it, he can see the ostentatious chandelier above their heads. In it, he can see her pale blue blazer, her hand warm and white on his shoulder.

He turns his head and meets her eyes. "How do you know that?" he asks.

She tilts her head.

"How do you know that I can trust Hannibal? How do you know him?"

She smiles. "He was my mentor when I was getting my doctorate," she tells him. "And beyond that, every single member of faculty, every student, every peer never had a bad word to say about him. He's a little…eccentric, but he's a good person."

"Good people tend to have bad endings where I'm concerned," Will says.

She sighs, and squeezes his shoulder, before letting her hand fall. "Do you think you're a bad person, Will?"

Will's eyes narrow. That fucking psychiatrist tone again. She's much less subtle with it than Hannibal is – maybe it's a kindness. Will hasn't exactly proven to be the easiest or most willing of patients.

He gives the question some thorough consideration, absently finishing the slice of toast. The bread is no longer warm and crunches loudly between his teeth. "Entropic, maybe," he replies at last, when it is finished, and he wipes his fingers on his clothes where they're stretched tight across his thighs. "An agent of chaos and mindless destruction."

She hums, at that. "An agent," she repeats, "or a conduit?"

He frowns and meets her eyes. "Is there a difference?"

"One receives orders and carries them out through their own designs. The other is merely a vessel through which evil things are done, without forethought or control." Her head tilts again, her smile gentle. "One of them can be held accountable for their actions. There is a difference between sticking a fork into an outlet and being struck by lightning."

Will considers that. "I suppose…." He trails off, and sighs, shaking his head. "I consider myself the latter, then. But no one else seems to."

Alana is quiet, for a moment, and then she nods as though coming to an internal decision. She straightens, and smooths imaginary wrinkles out of her capri pants. "Hannibal can handle

himself," she says, with a conviction Will, again, envies. "If this woman is real, and capable of doing harm at a physical level, it means she's capable of being harmed as well."

"She hates Alphas," Will says, feeling like a broken record skipping over the same track. "She's going to go right for him."

Alana presses her lips together. "Do you hate Alphas, Will?"

Will winces. "That's not a correlation."

"Still, if you're up to answering the question, I'd love to hear it."

Will sighs. "No," he says, shaking his head. "I don't hate them. Writing off an entire group of people for something they can't control makes no sense. Is my experience with them more in the negative? Sure, but I'd bet most Omegas can say the same. Probably most women, too, while we're on the subject."

Alana laughs. She has a nice laugh, low and warm.

To Will's surprise, after the lawyer is summoned and has begun drawing up the new contract – Will cannot imagine what he's thinking, drafting up constant swaps for someone like him – Jack takes Will, alone, to another room. It's much smaller, and probably where the servants dine, Will guesses, from the plain table and lack of adornment.

Jack takes out his phone and presses it to record, setting it down face up. "Will," he says, settling with a sigh. "I want to clear up a few things, before we proceed and everything gets signed. I intend to use my Voice."

Will's eyes widen, and he swallows.

"Since I'll be using my Voice, this will not be admissible in court, and everything you say stays between us." Will nods, his stomach tensing to the point of pain. He drums his fingers against the backs of his opposite hand, knuckles going white. Jack regards him with a calm detachment, like a father who already knows their child did something bad, and is simply waiting for the confession.

Jack clears his throat, and when he speaks, Will feels the weight of his Voice pressing down on his shoulders, flooding his skull like smoke. "Are you comfortable with the notion of going to live with Doctor Lecter, and being in his care?"

Will can't hesitate, compelled as he is; "Yes," he replies. "Doctor Lecter has been kind to me. I have no reason to suspect or fear him. Or Doctor Bloom, for the record."

Jack doesn't seem surprised by this, and Will remembers Alana's words for his support. Clearly, Hannibal has a good reputation amongst law enforcement and his peers. Jack nods,

lips pursed. "And you understand that you may still face criminal charges, while I continue my investigation?"

"Yes, Agent Crawford."

"Good." Jack leans forward, elbows on the table, fingers laced, mimicking Will's position. "Has Doctor Lecter, at any point, tried to coerce or force you into anything?"

Will winces. "That's a loaded question," he replies.

Jack's head tilts. "Try and answer it as best you can."

Will sighs. "He has soothed and placated me," he says. "He scruffed me during my cervical exam, but I gave him permission to do that. When I've been distressed, he's used classic calming techniques, touching placative points. So, no, he hasn't forced me to do anything. He's not forcing me now."

Jack nods, and seems settled by that.

His eyes dart to the phone, and he draws in a breath. Will knows what he's going to ask before he does, and even though he knows that the Voice will compel truth, and that he won't lie, every muscle in him goes tense;

"Did you kill Cordell?"

"*No*," Will hisses. Jack blinks at him.

"Did you kill any of the people in that house?"

"No," Will says again, jaw clenching. "I didn't. I'm not a fucking murderer."

Jack frowns, and presses his lips together. He nods, and turns the recording off on his phone. "Thank you, Will," he says, his voice gentler now. "The contract should be ready."

"Agent Crawford," Will asks, as Jack stands. Their eyes meet. "Is that enough for you to believe me?"

"It's not impossible to tell half-truths under compulsion," Jack replies, which is not an answer at all. Will closes his eyes, shoulders slumping in defeat.

"Francis and his crew have hours of footage. I know they saw the lady. There has to be proof, *somewhere*, there *has* to be."

"Will -."

"Have you even watched their footage?" Will demands, looking up at him again.

Jack sighs. "I have," he replies. "There's nothing on the cameras. All the footage was corrupted."

Will stares at him. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"I wish I was, Will. Really, I wish I was. But I'm not."

Will's eyes lower, and he stares at his hands. His knuckles are so white they resemble that of a ghost. "So it all comes down to Hannibal's testimony," he whispers. "I want it on record; if he dies, I didn't do it. I don't want to hurt him. Hannibal has been good to me."

"I believe you," Jack says. "Come, now, let's get you out of here."

Will nods, feeling more defeated than ever, and follows Jack back out to the main room, where they are all waiting, with the contracts in place.

Will doesn't want to think about the amount of money Hannibal has agreed to give the Vergers, to forgive Will's debt and assume his guardianship. The notion of a dowry is outdated but still in common practice, and he can't help thinking that it *is* some kind of mating agreement, though he's sure Hannibal doesn't view it as one.

But Hannibal has had his fingers inside Will and touched him more than Will has ever received from an Alpha that wasn't his family or boyfriend, and even with Neutral cooling his blood and keeping his heart rate slow, it's difficult to beat those instincts back into submission.

Jack insists on driving with Hannibal to his house, after Will has packed up his pitiful amount of belongings and loaded them into Hannibal's sleek dark Bentley. The richness oozing from Hannibal's possessions is less abrasive than the Vergers' overstated wealth, but it still makes Will itch.

Jack follows in his own vehicle, Will in the passenger seat of Hannibal's car. Hannibal has the air conditioning on high, probably for Will's benefit since he's overheated and still lingering in the waves of preheat. He sucks in a breath.

"So how's this experiment going to go?" he asks, when the silence goes from uncomfortable to unbearable.

To his credit, Hannibal doesn't visibly react, except to give Will a warm, brief smile. "First, I intend to help you establish a comfortable behavior pattern. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't believe you've ever had three solid meals a day or regular sleep for a while."

He's not wrong. Will nods.

"I myself adhere to a very rigid routine," Hannibal continues. "So, first, we will put you on the same one, and adjust accordingly."

"It's going to go to shit the second I sleep," Will mutters.

Hannibal concedes to that with a small nod. "Always a possibility. But you haven't had the opportunity to be comfortable for a while, either. Perhaps, with a nest and warm food and a safe location, you will be able to rest for a few nights, at least."

Will blinks, his eyes wide. "A nest?" he echoes.

"Of course, Will, did you think I would deny you one of the most basic Omega needs?"

"Honestly, I genuinely didn't even think it would have crossed your mind."

Hannibal doesn't take offense to that. He merely smiles. "Well, I'm happy to surprise you, in that regard," he says lightly. "You will have your own room that you can decorate as you'd like. I have plenty of sheets and bed linens to spare, and we can go shopping for anything else to suit your tastes."

Will can't help how he stares. "Do you just live in a constant state of readiness where some unfortunate Omega will land in your lap?" he asks, unable to hide the bitterness from his voice.

Hannibal laughs, and shakes his head. "Preparedness is essential to the whims of life, Will," he replies.

"Mm. And how does this *preparedness* extend to the lady? To the fact that you're probably going to have an attempt on your life as soon as night falls?" Will challenges.

Hannibal's eyes crinkle at the corners, a subtle not-smile tugging at his mouth. "I require very little sleep," he says. "And, if you're amenable, I can sedate you ahead of time, allowing ample opportunity for this woman to appear. She doesn't seem to fear detection, or avoid getting caught. If she appears, my being awake will not stop her."

"I don't want you to sedate me," Will hisses, sharply. "I need to be able to react."

Hannibal nods. "Very well."

Will doesn’t know what to do with that. Hannibal is being far too accommodating, far too reasonable. No one should be this fucking *calm* when inviting someone who, on paper, is absolutely insane, where the possibility of getting killed is as certain as the sunrise. "Why are you doing this?" Will breathes. "Honestly. I can't figure it out. It's like a noise in my skull I can't identify."

Hannibal tilts his head. "I suppose…it's a combination of things," he says, finally. His fingers flex on the steering wheel, just a small thing, but it draws Will's eye. Hannibal has large hands, defined and graceful. The hands of an artist. "I promised I would tell you my story, and perhaps one day I'll recount the whole thing. I know what it's like to see true horror, and to have that horror follow you once you're in a 'safe place'."

He pauses, and his eyes flash to Will. "And I know what it's like to have violent thoughts."

Will laughs nervously, petting over the back of his neck. The ease with which he can touch his own skin startles him – he'd gotten used to having longer hair. "That's not very

reassuring," he says. "Given that I'm about to come live with you."

Hannibal smiles. "Whether you believe me or not, Will, I can only assure you I mean you no harm. You might even believe me, one day."

"Whether you mean me harm or not is irrelevant," Will replies. "I don't mean you any harm either. But you might die."

"It's a risk I'm willing to take."

"So that's it? Sympathy and professional curiosity?"

"Deep sympathy, and boundless curiosity. But I suppose I should also admit that I find you… comforting to be around. It's rare to meet someone that piques my interest."

"Should I be flattered?" Will asks.

"I'm not trying to placate you," Hannibal says. "Merely attempting to answer your question. I'm wary of speaking more plainly, given how defensive you are." Will arches a brow in challenge, and Hannibal sighs. "I consider you my friend, even with the newness of our relationship. I'd like to deepen that friendship, if you'll allow it."

"You speak so carefully," Will says. "For every word you say I can tell there are a thousand more you won't utter."

Hannibal smiles. "Guilty as charged."

"So, what?" Will presses. "We're just going to sit around and have friendly conversations and you're going to give me a nest and clothes and treat me like a fucking -. Like a *kept boy*, while you wait around to die? Are you going to *examine* me again?"

Hannibal's lips purse. "Technically, it's within my right to," he concedes. "But I don't think it's necessary. And I doubt you would consent to it."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means, Will, that if you do want me to touch you, you're going to have to ask." Will stares at him in silence, and then Hannibal turns the corner, and parks the car with a smile. "We're here."

Hannibal's house is, somehow, exactly what Will thought it was going to be. It's a detached brownstone, severe and timeless in build, and welcoming. The lights are on inside, haloing the air with warm golden light, the lawn is perfectly manicured. There's no build up of leaves in the gutters, no streaks on the roof. The house smiles down at him like its master; it does not blink curiously, nor glare, nor lift its nose up and sniff at him.

Will gets out of the car, staring up at it. Jack pulls in behind Hannibal and he hears the two Alphas talking, but doesn't pay attention to what they're saying. It's probably more legal bullshit and procedural questions – Hannibal's schedule, his intended routine for Will, the

arrangements for his living space. Things asked of foster parents and adoption agencies and people who take in strays.

Will walks up to the house, and tests the door. It's not locked. Of course it's not – this is a nice neighborhood and Hannibal is a strong Alpha with a good reputation. No one would think to break in.

The inside of the house is teal and brown and beautiful. Blue is a settling color for Omegas, as is gold, and Will can see highlights of it in the frames of paintings along the walls, in the door handles. The kitchen, which he gravitates towards first like a homing beacon, shines modern and clean. But it doesn't make him itch. This is the clean of someone who takes great pride in their home, who wants to make it welcoming, not oppressive and intimidating.

He can't help the urge to rub his fingers along his neck, and then on the cupboards and the door frames as he goes from room to room. If he is to live here, now, and if Hannibal is sincere in his desire to be accommodating, then he can't begrudge Will the need to scent-mark. The house smells like Hannibal and things Will hasn't experienced for months; fresh meat and whiskey and cigar smoke, and wood polish, the light lemony scent of cleaners, of open air and new air conditioning and laundry.

He enters the dining room, and eyes the broad, vast stretch of the strong table, made from a single solid piece of mahogany. It probably costs more than the house, and doesn't budge even a little when he nudges his fingers against it, absently marking the place he will sit at the left of the head of the table. He takes in the wide fireplace, and shivers. That's where the meals are, where the rats hide.

He almost expects to see Randall's face appear at him from the maw of the firepit. But there is nothing, because ghosts don't follow people like demons do. Randall is gone.

He's staring at the portrait of a woman and a swan when Hannibal and Jack enter the room. Hannibal is smiling, Jack's expression carefully neutral. Will tenses his shoulders and sets his teeth on edge. "Are we good?" he asks.

Jack nods. "I'll be sure to keep in touch if there's any development with the investigation." Will narrowly avoids rolling his eyes. How Jack can still think he killed people, when he confessed under Voice-duress that he didn't, he may never know. Jack nods to Hannibal. "Doctor Lecter, good luck with your experiment. Will."

With that, he leaves. Will drums his knuckles along the edge of the table and sucks in a breath until his lungs burn. He nods to the painting. "Hell of an icebreaker."

Hannibal tilts his head. ""I'm rather fond of oddities," he replies. "But I can't take credit for that. It was here when I moved in."

Will laughs. "See? Icebreaker."

"Would you like to see your room?" Hannibal asks after a moment of silence, stepping to one side and gesturing back down the hallway. Will goes, and shivers as Hannibal follows him. His suitcase is by the front door, so he takes it and makes Hannibal lead the way up the stairs.

At the top of the stairs is another hallway, which stretches left and right. There are two doors to the right, three on the left. "My room is here," Hannibal tells him, gesturing to the farthest door on the right. "This," he adds, gesturing to the second, "is a guest room, not currently in use." He turns and heads to the left and opens the last door. "This will be your room."

He opens it, revealing a room barren of decoration aside from a bed and a dresser, as well as some sliding closet doors. The carpet is beige and the walls are painted a gentle sky blue, the bed dressed in black. It's low to the ground and wide, dipped in the middle as is common for mattresses intended to be turned into nests.

"The other doors are a guest bathroom – your bathroom – and a linen closet," Hannibal says, as Will steps in and sets his bag down. "Feel free to use anything in there you'd like. If you need anything else we can visit the store before they close, or tomorrow morning if you'd rather rest."

Will clears his throat, and swallows. "I don't want to mess up your routine too badly."

"Nonsense, Will. This will require some adjustment for us both."

Will sighs, closing his eyes. "I suppose."

Hannibal is silent for a moment longer, and then he makes a noise that draws Will's attention. "I'll leave you to it," he murmurs, his hand on the doorknob. "If you need anything, please let me know. I'll get started on lunch."

Will swallows. "Hannibal," he says, stopping the Alpha when the door is half-way shut. "I… want to thank you. Really. I can't promise you won't regret this but I understand the sacrifices you're making for me and the gestures, and -. They're appreciated."

Hannibal smiles. "Perhaps they will spare me my life, for a while," he jokes. Will knows he's joking, but he doesn't laugh. "Get some rest, Will. I'll call you when dinner's ready, if you're still up here. Even if you want to sleep, feel free to."

Will nods. "Thank you," he says, and watches the door close behind Hannibal with a small 'click'. He turns away, eyeing the bed, and goes to it, sitting down on it. His fingers spread out over the soft black bed covering and he curls up on himself, rubbing his hands through his hair.

This house feels different. It doesn't make him itch like the Vergers' did and it's certainly not as terrifying as the other house. This place feels far more like a home. It takes Will a moment to recognize the feeling that's settling over his shoulders as something dangerously close to *welcome*, to relaxation. He's at ease, here.

Maybe that's Hannibal's influence, maybe it's because he's finally somewhere he doesn't feel like he's being fucking hunted. It's nice. It's weird and novel and he's not one hundred percent certain what to do with that information.

His eyes gravitate to the closed closet doors. After a moment, he stands, and pushes them open so that he can see inside. There are some empty hangers, but nothing else. He's not

going to let her sneak up on him, when she inevitably decides to show up.

Because she will show up. Will isn't a fool, and he's not naïve. He can only hope that, when she does, he has the strength to fight her off and protect Hannibal. He will, he has to – not just for himself, but because Hannibal doesn't deserve to die, not after everything he's done for Will, and Will is going to protect him. To the death, if it comes to that.

It probably will. He thinks this and accepts it with a calm clarity. It feels like the first solid, rational thought he's had in months. It's odd, considering how briefly they've known each other, to think that, yes, he would put his life on the line to defend Hannibal's.

Maybe it's not just Omegas that inspire devotion, when all's said and done.

He's tired. He wants to build a nest but can't muster the energy to, so he ends up curling back up in the dip of the mattress, warm and settled for the moment, and closes his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

things are going to heat up next chapter in MANY ways....

Chapter 10

Will does manage to drift off to sleep, in a room that smells like nothing at all. He stirs to find the light coming in from the window muted, vaguely dark blue and orange – a sunset. A shiver runs down his spine, knowing that the magic hour draws near.

The closet doors are still open, they haven't been disturbed. No red eyes peer out at him from the darkness beneath the empty coat hangers. The only difference between going to sleep and waking up is that his meagre amount of possessions have been brought in, and set by the door.

He can smell food. His stomach rumbles sharply, reminding him that apart from the toast Hannibal basically force fed him that morning, he hasn't eaten.

He pushes himself upright, shoving his hair back from his face, and goes to his bags, turning on the light by the door. It's so bright he winces. He wants to turn it off almost immediately, but there's safety in the light, so he leaves it on.

He brings his bags to the bed and unpacks them. Hannibal sourced him clothes that look more like the uniform he would have worn if he'd remained at the Vergers, but there are some casual clothes in there as well – t-shirts and comfortable sleep pants a little too nice to purely be used as pajamas, and could justify being worn around the house.

He pulls on a pair, and a shirt over his head. They fit him perfectly – of course they do. Will doesn't know why he expected anything else. The bottles of shampoo, body wash, and other toiletries Hannibal got for him are in the bags as well, and Will gathers them, leaving the bedroom and crossing the hall.

The guest bathroom is mostly white – there's a shower stall and no bathtub, a toilet, a large counter, and a standing self that, again, is empty. All these extra hiding places make Will's skin itch. The lady has already shown that she has no problem twisting and creeping out of whatever she can fit into, be it a closet or a shower or beneath the bed.

He sets his things down, eyeing the shower stall. It has a door instead of a curtain, frosted from chest to knee height. Nowhere to hide. He likes that.

The scent of food is pervasive, even in here, and Will's stomach rumbles sharply again. He washes his face and brushes his teeth to get rid of the tacky feeling along his gums, runs his damp hands through his hair, and heads back out.

There's music, coming from downstairs. For a moment, Will can only stop, and listen to it. *Music*. He hasn't heard something like that for what feels like a lifetime. Randall preferred to talk during car rides, so he kept the radio low, and while Hannibal had had music on his car, their conversation had prompted him to do the same.

The track is all violins and piano scales, simple but pleasant to Will's untrained ear. He rests his hand on the bannister, at the top of the landing, and listens. It's a bright and happy tune,

and makes him think of long walks through fields of wildflowers, with mountains stretching high in the distance. Summery and with skies of blue.

He goes downstairs, seeking it out.

It's coming from the study, past the dining room. Hannibal isn't in this room, but the doors are open to allow sound to travel. A record player attached to a set of speakers sits on a shelf, playing the music. Will closes his eyes, gravitating closer, and opens them again when the track softens, and switches to another one. The second one is much like the first, but with a slower pace. Hidden rivers and valleys in the mountains, the places where people can gather and watch the stars come out.

He eyes the thick books on Hannibal's shelves. The large fireplace that is dark and empty. It doesn't fill him with dread, this time. It's not a portal through which dark and dangerous things will hunt him, but a promise of heat and light. Will's fingers drag along the cool stone of the mantle, noting that there's not a single speck of dust.

He travels to the piano, the writing desk, the large leather couches. The coffee table between them, made of glass and holding a marble Chess board. The collection of bottles filled with dark liquid on a small table by the window. The heavy drapes that, in the darkness, look black.

He senses motion, eyes on the back of his neck, and freezes. Omegas are sensitive to that kind of thing, and given how he's spent the last few months, Will had honed an even sharper awareness of when there are eyes on him.

He turns, and sees Hannibal by the door. He relaxes. "Sorry," he murmurs, and gestures to the record player. "I heard the music."

Hannibal merely smiles, and nods, like finding Will snooping around his things is perfectly acceptable. His eyes are dark when they take Will in from head to toe. "Do the clothes fit well? Are they comfortable?" he asks.

Will nods. "Thank you."

"Are you hungry?"

"Starving," Will says, with another insistent rumble from his stomach.

Hannibal's smile widens, and he steps back into the dining room, beckoning Will to him. Will follows like he's being led on a leash, past Hannibal, to see that Hannibal has set places for them. His, at the head of the table, and one for Will's, at his left-hand side. So that Will can see the kitchen door and be closer to the study.

"I plan on having wine," Hannibal tells him. "If you'd like something else, I have other options."

"I trust your palate," Will murmurs.

Hannibal's eyes shine with amusement. "Very well. Have a seat."

Will obeys, drumming his fingers anxiously along his thighs. This will be the first real meal he's had since before entering the house. Hannibal seems very particular, and from the scent of the food, Will is sure he's not going to be disappointed. He can only hope his own table manners haven't suffered too badly in the last few months.

Hannibal returns, a moment later. He carries one plate in his hand, the other carefully balanced on his forearm, and in his other hand is a decanter of red wine. He sets the decanter down, and places Will's plate in front of him, and then his own. He fills Will's wine glass with wine before he fills his, and a water glass beside it from a jug in the middle of the table.

"This looks delicious," Will murmurs, because it does, and he would do well to praise Hannibal whenever he can. He is, after all, here by the Alpha's good graces. "What is it?"

"Pork," Hannibal tells him, "in a Cumberland sauce, with grilled asparagus and potatoes." He hesitates, then says; "I elected to make a meal that wouldn't upset your stomach too badly. We must coax it back to being adventurous, after your experience."

Will wants to say something to that, but he can't exactly argue – all he's had is toast since he got out, and before that, anything that scurried or grew around the house. He didn't get too sick while inside the house, thank whatever the Hell might have been watching over him, and he doesn't want to start now.

"I appreciate the thought," he says instead of anything else. Hannibal smiles at him, and takes up his knife and fork. Will waits until he takes the first bite, remembering; Alpha eats first. That's just how it works.

So he watches, as Hannibal's lips close around the tines of his fork, and he pulls off the first slice of pork, chews and swallows it. Only when he reaches to wash it down with wine does Will begin to eat as well. If Hannibal notes his behavior, and is either pleased or confused by it, he doesn't say. Hannibal is older and fancier than Will; he probably knows these rules better than Will does.

Hannibal allows him to eat in silence for a while, testing his stomach with the salty pork, the bitter sauce, the warm heaviness of the potatoes and the crunch of asparagus between his neglected teeth. It's all fantastic, and the more he eats, the more hungry Will feels.

"There's plenty more," Hannibal tells him, halfway through.

Will flushes. "Am I that obvious?"

"You've gone a very long time without a constant source of food, Will. It's natural to have some lingering need for assurance."

"I'm aware of my current situation," Will says, an edge to his voice. "I doubt you'll let me starve."

Hannibal smiles at him, in a way that's more a light in his eyes than a shape of his mouth. "Of course," he replies, with a conceding nod. "Forgive me. I suppose I'm projecting."

Will meets his eyes, and tilts his head.

Hannibal's expression changes, just slightly, into something that looks more sheepish than anything else. He clears his throat and reaches for his wine, but doesn't take a drink. "I went through a period of food insecurity in my youth," he explains. "I was never certain when my next meal would be, or if it would come at all. One thing was certain; it was never enough."

"Oh," Will breathes, immediately guilty over snapping at him before. "I'm sorry."

Hannibal smiles at him. "It was a long time ago," he assures Will; "And as you've no doubt noticed, I made sure that I would never be in that position again. I suppose I simply wanted to reassure you of the same."

"Thank you," Will murmurs.

"Eat as much as you'd like Will; as I said, there is plenty."

Will nods, trying to push past that little coil of guilt in his chest from snapping at Hannibal. He turns his attention back to his food and continues to eat. It really is fantastic, and Will hadn't realized how novel eating *warm* food would be again. Not the lukewarm meat of a live body, but something heated in an oven that makes his chest and stomach burn.

Behind him, the track that was playing ends, and a new one begins. This one starts off much softer; Will has to strain to hear it. It's a chorus of low cello notes, the occasional trill of a flute the only thing that makes Will aware that music is playing, for a moment.

"Hannibal," he murmurs, when their plates are almost empty. Hannibal tilts his head. "If I'm…acquitted. What happens then?"

Hannibal purses his lips, sipping his wine. "I suppose that depends on if we have determined the true nature of this woman you keep seeing," he replies. Will huffs. "If you're not carted away to a jail cell, then you are more than welcome to stay here."

Will frowns down at his plate. "I don't want you to feel responsible for me," he mutters.

Hannibal is quiet, for a moment, and then he says; "You cannot control my feelings on the matter." Will looks up, finds Hannibal watching his wine, his eyes dark. "My priority right now is isolating and diagnosing the cause of your experiences with the lady of the house. Everything else can be discussed later."

Will narrowly manages to avoid rolling his eyes. "You make it sound so simple."

"Because it is, Will," Hannibal tells him, finally looking his way. "You are under attack. I have chosen to defend you in any way I can." And Will wants to ask *why*, but every time he does Hannibal gives him some placative and nonspecific answer, and he doubts he'll get anything different tonight.

So he sighs, and drops his gaze to his plate. "Well," he says dryly, "I hope you make it out the other side."

Hannibal laughs, gently. Will looks past him, to the windows behind him. The sky is dark now, night has fallen. It feels colder.

Hannibal sets his glass down, sensing the change in atmosphere. "If you still don't want to be sedated -."

"I don't," Will replies immediately. "She -. She didn't always come when I was asleep. In the house, at least. But I don't know what she'll do here."

Hannibal hums. "Logic would suggest you do your best to fall asleep, and then I remain in the room to monitor you." Will nods absently. "But she may not manifest if I'm nearby."

"Great," Will mutters.

"It will be an engaging experiment," Hannibal says brightly, and meets Will's eyes again. "That is, if you're tired. Otherwise we shall have to entertain ourselves some other way."

Will clears his throat, his fingers curling around his wine glass. He takes a sip; his first of the night. It's a deep red and almost unbearably sweet, sitting thick on his tongue like syrup as he takes a drink. He clears his throat and sets it back down.

"If…you wouldn't mind," he begins, and Hannibal tilts his head, "I'd like some more to eat."

Hannibal smiles widely, like nothing would please him more. "Of course," he says, and takes Will plate, getting to his feet in one smooth motion. "I'll return shortly."

Will ends up eating an additional serving, and combined with the sweet, heavy wine, finds his eyelids drooping as Hannibal clears the plates. He rises, insistent on helping Hannibal, on making sure he doesn't come off as a freeloader when Hannibal has already done so much for him. His kitchen holds the same quiet luxury as the rest of his house, and Will feels settled inside its walls. Not curled up and trembling in the talons of a predator, but rather held, gently, in loving hands.

It's nice. It feels so nice to just simply *relax*, and Will can barely breathe around that knot of emotions. He feels ridiculous for reacting so strongly to something to simple. He's probably going to need a good therapist when all of this is over.

Hannibal invites him to the study, and Will goes. He wants to listen to more of that soothing music and enjoy the presence of a person who calms him so much. He might not get this again. If the lady comes, and hurts Hannibal, then Will won't ever forgive himself.

Hannibal refills his wine, killing the bottle. Will holds it in both hands, on one of the couches, hunched in. Hannibal lights the fire, creating a warm golden glow in the dark study. Will doesn't fear the shadows, and isn't that such a novel thing?

"Do you play?" Hannibal asks, when he catches Will eyeing the Chess board.

Will presses his lips together and takes a sip of wine. "I haven't played for years," he says, shifting down the couch so he's in front of the board, as Hannibal does the same. "I used to, back in high school. I had a teacher who taught me after school when my dad was late picking me up."

Hannibal's head tilts curiously. "Did you enjoy the lessons?" he asks.

"Yeah, I did," Will replies, biting his lower lip. "Until that same teacher cornered me one night and made it real difficult to get away, if you catch my drift."

Hannibal's face doesn't change, but Will hears his snarl, feels it like nails down his back. "Caught," Hannibal says. A short and simple word that holds teeth. "I'm sorry you went through something like that."

Will shrugs. "It was a long time ago. We moved soon after; I never had to see him again."

"Was your father aware of this teacher's advances?"

"If he was, it's not because I told him," Will replies.

Hannibal stares at him for another long moment, and Will sighs, rolling his eyes. "You look like you're dying when you're holding your tongue," he says with a wry smile. Hannibal's lips twitch, another flash of sheepishness. "Go on. Dissect away, Doctor."

"You wear your suffering like an old coat," Hannibal murmurs. "It's familiar. One of those hand-me-downs of biology you don't quite let go of." His head tilts again. "I imagine Randall, and his family, from the way you speak about him, was a breath of fresh air. A sunny day where you didn't have to wear that coat, and could bask in the sunlight instead."

Will swallows, and takes another drink of wine. Longer, this time, the alcohol sitting warm behind his collarbones. "Kind of comes with the territory of being Omega," he replies, trying to keep his voice light. He's not sure how well he succeeds. "But yes, I suppose – Randall never hurt me. Not once. Never said even something tangentially sexist or rude. He was… respectful." Will sucks in a breath. "Kind."

"I wish I could have met him," Hannibal says, and Will believes the sincerity in his voice. "I'm led to believe he protected you, in that house."

"He did," Will whispers. Shadows dance along the Chess board, like the pieces are alive, and can move on their own. "Right to the end."

"If this woman truly hates Alphas, as you say, then she had no reason to harm Randall, did she?" Hannibal presses, sitting forward, his elbows on his knees. Will doesn't shy back. He meets Hannibal's eyes. "Forgive me for prying, Will – I'm simply trying to understand. This woman, she acts as though she has compulsions of her own. Perhaps, if we can diagnose the origin of them, we can appease her, and she will fade away naturally."

"I don't know what she wants," Will says. "She said she -."

He stops, swallowing harshly, remembering her red eyes, her claws in his face. The way she had wept, wailing like a mother might hold her dead child in her arms, or a widow collapsing to her knees when her husband's commander brings her a flag and a small box of personal belongings.

"She said she wanted me to be safe," Will whispers, lowering his gaze again. "She's only spoken to me a few times. When we were escaping, she said I wasn't going anywhere. Then she said she wanted me to be safe, in the jail cell, when you found me. Then she kept asking where 'he' was, the night Cordell died. I assumed she meant Mason, but I have no idea."

Hannibal considers this, and makes a low, thoughtful sound. "Perhaps she considers herself your protector," he muses. Will frowns, biting his lower lip. "If you're in her care, she can kill any Alpha she perceives as a threat. Anyone who encroached upon that house. Anyone who is…around you, and makes you feel unsafe."

Will hums.

"There weren't just Alphas in that house, though," Hannibal continues. "There were women, and presumably Omega victims as well. Perhaps she protected them, in her own way." Will lifts his eyes, finds Hannibal's gaze on the fire. "But the needs of humans are not the same as that of ghosts."

"If that's true, then there's no stopping her," Will whispers. "If she kills every Alpha I speak to, I can't -. I can't go back to the house, either. It's burned to the ground. What the Hell does that leave?"

"Safety," Hannibal says, like he didn't even hear Will. Their eyes meet. "Did you feel safe, with the Vergers?"

"No," Will admits. "I wanted to, but I couldn't. Whenever Margot and Alana walked by, it sounded like her heels on the floor. And with Mason and Cordell…."

"An Alpha who made rather inappropriate remarks, and one who attempted to invade your body without your consent," Hannibal finishes. "No, I can't imagine you felt secure there." He presses his lips together.

Will knows what he's about to ask.

"Do you feel safe, with me?"

"Yes," Will replies. Because he does. He feels safer here than he can remember in a very long time.

Hannibal smiles, widely. He's pleased, and Will likes how he looks when he makes Hannibal smile like that. It makes his chest feel warm in a way he cannot entirely blame on the fire and the wine. Maybe the Neutral is wearing off. He clears his throat, and sets his glass down on the table.

"I think I could probably try to sleep, now," he says.

Hannibal nods, and stands, helping Will to his feet. His grip is strong, there's absolutely no fear or anticipation in his scent. It's like they've been roommates for years and this is just a normal part of their day.

Will goes upstairs and eyes the mattress. He leaves, and pulls more linens and sheets out of the closet, bringing them back and building something more closely resembling a nest. He closes the closet doors and wraps another sheet around the handles so that they can't be opened easily.

Hannibal brings him a glass of water, and he's holding a small device in his hands. Will's brows rise. "I'd like to attach this to you, if I may," Hannibal says, opening the halves of it to reveal that it's a clunky wristband, with a screen to measure Will's pulse. "If it detects a spike, I will get an alert on my phone, and can come investigate."

"Are you going to stay up all night?" Will asks, even as he holds his arm out for Hannibal to strap it into place. His touch is clinical but warm, lingering on Will's wrist as he measures Will's pulse and checks that the device is recording it accurately.

"If I need to," Hannibal says with a small smile. "But even if I fall asleep, I'm a light sleeper. I will wake if you're in danger."

He cups Will's face. "I promise."

Will swallows, blushing when the monitor kicks up a few paces. Hannibal doesn't comment, merely smiles at him, and lets him go. Will tries to calm his heart, cursing the device for giving himself away so obviously.

"Have a good night, Will," Hannibal calls, and leaves the room. Will drops to his nest, still clothed in what he wore to dinner, since it's comfortable enough to sleep in. He leaves the light on, and pulls some sheets over his body, curling up and yanking them high over his head.

If he doesn't move, and doesn't breathe, then she can't see him. She won't come for him, she won't hurt Hannibal.

He hopes, wishes, prays to a God he doesn't believe in, that that turns out to be true.

When Will wakes up, the room is dark, and he moans in dismay. "No," he says, shaking his head and curling up tighter. He can hear her ragged breathing, the chill in the air soaking into his bones. Hears, quietly, the brush of feet over the soft carpet, towards him. He knows if he opens his eyes and looks, the closet doors will be open, the sheet torn by savage claws.

His heart is racing, and he sees the monitor reflect it. It's up in the nineties, close to one hundred. Definitely high enough to alert Hannibal, if he's still awake.

If he's still alive.

A hand touches his shoulder and Will flinches, shoving himself upright and scrambling away.

There she is, half-burned and melted, with eyes so red they glow in the darkness. Her bared teeth snap at him, and she moves like a wraith, all her limbs twisted about and clicking together like pieces of a puppet being tugged all in the wrong directions.

Her head tilts, and tilts, until it's almost upside down, before it snaps into place with a loud crack. She puts both her hands on his nest, and one foot, breathing raggedly. "Get away from me," Will snarls, his back to the corner. She puts her other foot on his nest, and stares at him. "Leave. Leave me alone!"

"Where is he?" she rasps at him, and reaches out with a clawed hand. She catches his ankle and hauls him down the nest, towering over him like the worst Hellish mix of a spider and a woman. "Where is he?!"

"I'm not going to let you hurt him," Will snaps. He's dizzy from his racing heart and shivering with cold and fear, but he knows this much; Hannibal is *not* going to die. She wails at him, tearing at her hair and then at his stomach, nails catching in his clothes and deep enough to reopen the wounds already there.

Her claws pierce through the bandages, and she pauses. She blinks, and tilts her head around again. Her eyes lift to Will's injured cheek. She touches it and he flinches, making her claw another neat line down his jaw.

"Who did this?" she says.

Will bares his teeth at her, and kicks her as hard as he can, sending her sprawling back with a screech. "Hannibal!" he yells, as his heart rate kicks up another notch.

"Hannibal!" she echoes, and Will's blood goes cold. "Hannibal, Hannibal!" Her voice distorts, mechanical and deep, like a machine recording nearing the end of its life cycle. She sounds like the box Randall used to communicate with Will before the house went up in smoke.

"*Hannibal*!"

The door opens with a slam and the light comes on. Will winces, covering his eyes, as the woman wails again and disappears, as though she was never there. Will hears footsteps approaching and then warm, strong arms around him, holding him as he trembles with fever, soaked with sweat. There's blood on his hands from his face and stomach, and it smells like iron and life.

He gasps, and buries his face in Hannibal's shoulder. "Please tell me you saw her," he says desperately. "Please, *please* tell me you did."

"I did," Hannibal murmurs. He cups Will's skull and holds him close as Will clings to him. He fills his lungs with Hannibal's scent, drowns in it, seeking the calm and clarity that the Alpha has given him every time Hannibal has touched him.

He manages to open his eyes, and looks past Hannibal. The closet doors are open and the sheet he used to bind the handles lies in tatters. If Hannibal notices it, he doesn't comment.

"She knows your name, now," Will murmurs, defeated down to the bone. His heart rate is calming down, but remains high. That might not be because of the woman, though. Hannibal's fingers gently pet through his hair, his other arm strong around Will's shoulder. He's solid and he's real and Will clings to that like a lifeline.

"Did she speak to you again?" he asks. Will presses his ear to Hannibal's chest, feeling how it rumbles when he speaks.

He nods. "She asked where 'he' was, again. When I wouldn't tell her, she attacked me, and then she -." He pauses, frowning, and draws back. He wipes his hand over his face to clear it of tears, smearing blood into his mouth. He lowers his shaking hand and stares at it. "She asked me who bandaged me up. She seemed…."

Surprised? Sad? Angry?

"Confused," he settles on.

"An act of kindness is confusing to an abused animal." Hannibal cups his injured cheek and tilts it up, so that he can observe the new cut in the light. "It's not deep," he says, and Will nods. "Come; I'll get you cleaned up."

Will swallows, still feeling shaky, and nods. At least he didn't throw up this time. Hannibal helps him from the nest, gentle on his face and hands, and removes the wristband from Will's arm. Will is glad it won't give him away any more while Hannibal tends to him.

"Hannibal," he whispers, halting the Alpha in place. Hannibal meets his eyes. He's dressed for bed, in a matching pair of striped pajama pants and a button-down, long-sleeved shirt. His hair is flat and falls across his forehead, no longer slicked back and styled to perfection. His cheeks are flushed, skin beneath his eyes a little dull. Will did wake him, he realizes, and he came running anyway, ready to fight. To protect, and defend him.

Will curls his fingers around Hannibal's wrist, steps up close to him, and rests his clean cheek against Hannibal's. He forces a weak purr from his throat, and sighs when Hannibal audibly sucks in a breath. "Thank you. For everything. I'm just -. Really glad you saw her."

Hannibal turns his head, cheek brushing Will's. His hands, tentative almost, settle on Will's flanks, holding him close as Hannibal purrs for him in kind, a gentle rumble Will feels more than hears, against his cheek.

Will clenches his fists, sucks in another deep breath. The urge to nuzzle closer, to seek more comfort and strength in Hannibal's arms, is almost overwhelming. He hadn't realized how *hard* relief would hit him once Hannibal saw her, too. Once he knew that Will wasn't crazy. Once he believed.

And he believes now. And he can help Will, now. And Will is going to keep him alive and Hannibal will keep him safe and maybe, maybe then….

He can't let himself think about it, but it clouds his head and makes his voice soft when he sighs. Hannibal answers him with a sigh of his own, and says, "Let's get you cleaned up."

Will nods, and lets Hannibal take him by the wrists, and lead him out of the room.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

> reminder of the tags: there's more graphic conversations surrounding Will's infidelity and miscarriage in this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They go to Hannibal's kitchen, and Hannibal plants him on the bar stool while he fetches his first aid kit, a bowl of warm water, and some wipes and bandages for Will's face and hands. He allows Will to wash his face, watching him all the while, then checks the bandages folded across his stomach.

He tuts to himself, but doesn't comment, merely replaces them. She didn't grab as deep as she has before, as deep as she could have, so they begin to clot readily enough and Will presses his bandages against his aching stomach, eager for the reassurance of their clinging weight.

Then, Hannibal turns his attention to Will's cheek. He's careful when he cleans Will's broken skin, smooth brushes of the antibacterial wipe like a soothing tongue, his fingers gently holding Will's chin to keep him in place when he winces at the sting. He puts another plaster across the wound, cut to shape so it doesn't cover any more of Will's face than it has to.

Will watches him cleaning up, and doesn't know what to say.

"What are you thinking about?" he whispers, watching Hannibal put away the first aid kit and wash out the bowl, the water tinged a light pink.

"How it must be tempting to drift away," Hannibal replies after a moment, turning to look at Will. "To sink inside yourself and surrender to this persistent terror that's haunting you."

Will swallows, and says nothing.

Hannibal approaches him, taking one of Will's hands in both his own and squeezing. He lowers his head so Will can easily meet his eyes. "Stay with me, Will."

"Where else would I go?" Will mutters, thick with despair. "Where could I go where she wouldn't find me?"

"Where indeed?" Hannibal echoes, soft with sympathy. He squeezes Will's hand again and Will resists the urge to tug him closer, to let Hannibal envelope him in his strong arms and to hide away like a frightened child in the promising safety of his chest.

He doesn't, but it's a close thing.

“Perhaps a drink,” Hannibal suggests. Will doesn’t know what time it is anymore, but the thought of trying to sleep now, to go back to that room and risk her wrath again, terrifies him in a way he can’t put into words. He nods, and lets Hannibal lead him into the study.

There are bottles on a table by the window, the curtains drawn as a heavy shield against the outside world. It’s comfortable and warm in Hannibal’s den, the couches plush, leather soft to the touch. He sinks down on one and gratefully accepts the glass Hannibal offers him, pleased to see the Alpha had given him a generous amount.

“Now we have seen your reality,” Hannibal says behind Will’s head as he pours himself his own drink. The gentle trickle and slosh of liquid in the glass is the only noise in the room aside from their breathing, for a while. “We must adjust our focus for the resolution.”

Will frowns. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that we are dealing with a third party. Confirmed.” Will snorts. He could have told Hannibal that – hasn’t that been what he’s been trying to tell everyone since the beginning? “This means that this woman, whoever she is, has her means, her motives, her goals.”

Hannibal comes around and takes his place on the other couch, facing Will. He looks tired, Will notes, but his eyes gleam wolf-like in the darkness, the Alpha urge to hunt down a threat igniting his iris and oozing curiosity through his blood like adrenaline. Will can taste it, or maybe that’s just the smokiness of the wine Hannibal gave him.

Hannibal sits forward, his elbows on his knees, and fixes Will in place with his gaze. “I need you to tell me everything, Will,” he says. “Everything you have noted about this woman. Everything she might have said.” He tilts his head to one side. “Francis said there were ghosts in the building. Her victims.”

Will nods. “Even saw Randall there, after he died,” he says quietly, unable to break eye contact with Hannibal. He finds himself leaning forward too, cradling his wine with both hands around the bowl of his glass, the need for alcohol to dull his senses momentarily forgotten. “She didn’t like it when I tried to leave. She’d wail like a banshee and stomp around the house until I got scared and hid away.”

Hannibal nods. “Yet you explored the house.”

“I had to. Needed to find food, spare blankets when the ones I was using were torn to shreds. There was enough left over of the house to keep myself alive.” Barely. Hannibal’s eyes flick down Will’s body, as though his sunken stomach and bone-thin wrists are confirmation enough. He meets Will’s eyes again.

“She kept Randall alive for a while,” he murmurs, frowning to himself. “But then she killed him. What happened?”

Will swallows, the memory of that morning burned into the backs of his eyes, a sunspot he will never be able to blink away. “I miscarried,” he rasps, that familiar guilt of his infidelity, of the fact that he hadn’t aborted the child as soon as he found out, rising up in him like bile. He remembers the stark scent of blood, the stain of it all over his legs and the mattress

Randall had dragged into a corner so Will didn't feel so exposed. "I woke up and he was there, jaw torn clean off. And I was… There was so much blood."

His voice goes quiet.

"Should I have survived that? I wasn't that far along." He huffs, a bitter smile twisting his lips. "Maybe I died in that house, too, and I just don't know it yet."

"I think I'd know if I was speaking to a ghost," Hannibal says mildly. "I've touched you enough to confirm that you are very much alive, Will. Don't let yourself follow the white rabbit down that hole. You might never come up again."

Will nods along, heat blushing along his cheeks as he remembers that, yes, Hannibal has certainly touched him. Intimately. The idea of giving a cervical exam to a ghost is laughable, but he resists the urge to. There's a time and a place for morbid humor like that.

He frowns down at his wine, lower lip caught between his teeth as he thinks. The action pulls on his bandages, a subtle sting that reminds him that this is real. She is real. Hannibal wants to help him, and he already knows the darkest parts of Will's history. Together, maybe… Maybe they can figure this out.

"She was crying when I woke up," he recalls. He hadn't paid much attention to it at the time, there had been Randall's corpse and the loss of life from inside him to focus on, as well as the terror that gripped him like a vice along every bone in his body, compelling him to hide away from her, certain that she'd kill him, next. "Sobbing. Pitifully, I could barely hear it."

He never saw her that day, but he imagines her bent over herself, her head in her hands, bloody tears leaking through her fingers. A sudden, surprising pang of sympathy hits him and he wants to recoil from it, hating its existence. He has no sympathy for *her*.

Hannibal's head tilts again. "Do you think she was remorseful?"

"I…" Will trails off, the instinctive denial dying on his tongue. "She said she wants me to be safe," he murmurs. His hand comes up, scratching Randall's old bite mark on his neck. The mark she keeps trying to claw off, and might have succeeded if Will let her. "Maybe she didn't think Randall could keep me safe?"

It sounds odd to say, but in the right light… Randall was the one who coaxed Will into the house. Randall was the one who gave up too soon on trying to find a way out, saying that someone would notice they were missing, someone would come to get them. Randall was the one who barricaded the doors whenever he left – to keep Will safe, yes, but also trapping him in their room, fearing that he wouldn't make it back this time. If he hadn't, Will would have starved, or beaten himself bloody trying to escape the room.

"Is it possible," Hannibal says gently, "that she interpreted your miscarriage as proof of yours and Randall's incompatibility?"

Will shakes his head sharply. "She was wrong," he hisses. "The child wasn't his. He had no part in it."

“I’m not saying she was correct, Will, I’m asking if it’s possible that’s a reasonable deduction for her to have made.” He pauses, then forges on. May as well rip all the band-aids off at once. “Perhaps she sensed your fear of discovery. After all, had you not miscarried, you would have been almost…four months along by now?” Will nods. Give or take a week or so. “You wouldn’t have been able to hide that. You would have had to explain to Randall what you had done.” He pauses again, wetting his lips. “Perhaps she was trying to save you. Or, when it happened, she thought Randall had been the one to harm you so badly that you lost your child.”

Tears sting at Will’s eyes, his knuckles white and trembling around the glass of wine. He drinks it all down and resists the urge to fling the glass away, to hear it shatter, to tear at his hair and scream how fucking *unfair* it all is. One stupid decision right after another, and now Randall is *dead* and Will is *still* dealing with the consequences.

“But that doesn’t explain the hotel,” Will finally makes himself say. He meets Hannibal’s eyes, finds him blurry through tear-streaked vision, monstrous and shadowy in the dark, without edges. “She came to me then. Twice. Tried to attack Francis. Francis has *never* made me feel unsafe.”

“He took you away from her,” Hannibal replies. “The place where she thought she could protect you. The place where, in her eyes at least, she could keep you from harm.”

Will thinks of the way she would corner him, sometimes – even now. The way the red in her eyes looks so Alpha, the caress of her fangs along his throat in a mockery of pack bites, asserting dominance, establishing the hierarchy.

Female Alphas don’t exist, but after eating so much of their flesh, maybe her body doesn’t remember that anymore.

“So she wants to keep me safe,” Will murmurs, content to play along with the premise for now. “She attacked Cordell because he tried to touch me and I didn’t want him to.”

He doesn’t say what comes next. Hannibal has touched him. Hannibal has ferried him away and locked Will in his ivory tower, awaiting Jack’s decision and whatever action may be made against him in the eyes of the law. Hannibal is…

His guardian. The man who put his reputation and money on the line to buy Will’s freedom. The man who is trying to help him solve the mystery of the lady of the house.

“She hasn’t tried to hunt you,” Will breathes, and it shouldn’t be such a revelation, but it is. His voice shakes. “Hasn’t hurt you. Not even once.”

“Not the kind of person whose approval I normally seek, but self-serving as it is, I’m glad to have it for the moment,” Hannibal says mildly. He’s trying to joke, trying to put Will at ease. It works. The wine fogs his head and coats his tongue, honey smoke and something thick and dark, sweet as can be. His shoulders lax and his fingers fidget around the stem of his glass. He sucks in a breath through his teeth and glares down at the inoffensive glass.

“But she still wants something,” Will says. “I might be safe, and I do feel safe here, but I’m not free. She’s still trying to hunt me, still trying to get me to…do something? I don’t *know*.” He hisses the words, setting the glass down and raking his hands through his hair. “I don’t know what she *wants*.”

Hannibal is quiet for a moment. Then; “If the obstacle we’re facing is being able to talk to ghosts, we’re in luck,” he says. “We know just the people for the job.”

“Absolutely not,” Will snaps immediately. “She tried to kill Francis. God knows what she would do to the others. I can’t risk them like that.”

A sound cracks through the silence, making him damn near jump out of his seat so suddenly he almost ends up on the floor. Every muscle in him stiffens as, in the corner, Hannibal’s record player abruptly spins to life, the needle lying delicately against the grooves as the disc begins to spin.

Earlier, it was flutes and violins, a warm walk through an enchanted glade in the moonlight. Now, it’s jaunty piano, the old goldrush type, and a woman’s bright, happy voice begins to sing.

My love, your heart was made for me,
I’ll dig right down and never leave,
Let me make my home in your chest cavity,
Playing those heartstrings until you sing.

Hannibal meets his eyes, then slowly rises to his feet. Will follows suit, reaching for him without thinking, glad when Hannibal readily takes his hand. His heart is flying fast enough he knows the monitor would be going haywire if it was still attached.

My darling doll, your stuffing is my soul,
Let me string up your intestines like Carnivale,
And oh! You’ll love the way I decorate your veins,
Remake you from the inside, tattoo your ribs with my name.

Hannibal slowly walks around the couch, leading Will until they’re standing in front of the record player. The room is cold, freezing suddenly, and Will wants to fling on the lights to full brightness, expose her in the darkness. But he doesn’t hear her. He doesn’t see her red eyes, hear her heels or moaning or heavy, rasping breaths.

My pretty fountain, let me fill my mouth,
Make a river of blood spanning North to South,
And oh! If I ever seem a bit too much,
Just remember this song and remember my touch.

Will reaches for the needle, wanting to turn the song off. Hannibal stops him, fingers firm and warm around Will’s wrist, and shakes his head.

I’ve made a swing of your lungs and a nest of your brain,
Can you feel me, love? Oh! It drives me insane!

That there are others out there who could love you the same,
But you'll always be mine, can you say I'm to blame?

The piano picks up, a big brass band joining in for the grand finale:

Oh! My! Love! Taste the life we might lead,
If only you saw what I can see!
There's a flower, oh, Love! It needs only a seed.
Let it bloom! Let it blossom! Oh! Let it be freed!

The woman's voice hits the high note, the clashing cymbals and brass supporting her through the belting note as the piano goes haywire, notes clanging into a cacophony that hurts to listen to. Then, as suddenly as it had begun, the needle jerks off the record, the music scratches to a halt, and the room is once again plunged into silence.

Hannibal releases Will's wrist, and carefully pulls the needle all the way back.

"That song," Will begins weakly, hoping that there might be a reasonable explanation.

Hannibal shakes his head, squeezes Will's fingers where they're laced. When he puts the needle down again and starts the track, the violins and flutes return as though they had never stopped.

Will shudders, turning his face away.

"You might not want to talk to this woman, Will," Hannibal says quietly, meeting his eyes. "But it seems that she, quite desperately, wants to talk to you."

"I want to go on the record saying that this is a monumentally bad idea."

"Seconded," Brian says, dumping his duffle onto Hannibal's dining room table and wiping sweat from his brow. He doesn't even look at Will before he turns away and leaves, but Will notices Hannibal watching him, eyes slightly narrowed, and feels warmed at Hannibal's annoyance towards the disrespect.

"That's the last of it," Bev says brightly, opening a laptop and checking the connections for the recording machines, the EMF reader, the temperature sensors, and a shiny new PX that Francis refused to explain the origin of.

Hannibal had called Alana, who had called Francis, who had come by the very next day. He's stiff and formal in Hannibal's house, too regimented in the way he keeps deferring to Hannibal and Will, even as he thrums with nervous, aggressive energy. Will doesn't know how to read his behavior, but swallows his tongue and the urge to pull him aside and speak to him about it.

He's never feared Francis, always found him charming in that gruff older brother kind of way, but he knows better than to get him alone. Who knows what might trigger the lady to show up.

"Thanks, Bev," Francis says when she's done, and tosses her the van keys. "I'll call you when you can come pick me up."

Bev frowns at him.

So does Will. "You're not staying."

"With all due respect, I certainly am," Francis says, arching a brow. "This is my equipment, this is my ghost study, and frankly I think if this bitch shows up again, three people are better than two, or am I wrong?"

He looks pointedly at the bandages on Will's face, and Will flushes, looking away.

"I'm sure your knowledge of these machines alone will prove invaluable, Francis," Hannibal says mildly. He'd taken quite a liking to Francis, Will notices. Perhaps there's something Alpha in both of them that can share common ground on the desire to protect the Omega in their care. Omegas inspire devotion, Hannibal said so himself, and Will is not naïve. "I appreciate you coming by on such short notice."

Francis nods, looking appeased. He turns back to Bev. "Go on. I know Brian's probably fake-revving the engine right now."

Bev smiles weakly. "He's been a mess since that house," she admits, biting her lower lip and looking towards the front door. Brian entered the house exactly twice to bring equipment. He forbade Jimmy from entering at all.

She turns back to Will and gives him a nod and 'thumbs up'. "Good luck," she says, and then she leaves, closing the door behind her. Hannibal follows to see her out, and locks it when she leaves. Will can feel Francis' desire to speak to him, to ask him how he's doing, if Hannibal is treating him well, but they're not quite alone enough for that.

"I've closed and locked every door and window," he begins once he returns, looking between Francis and Will. Francis busies himself with the array of machines, setting up temperature sensors at the study door and door to the hallway and kitchen. "I have also shut the upstairs doors, and every door except those leading to this room. Hopefully that will persuade her not to wander."

He says it so mildly, like this is just another Tuesday to him. Will envies his casualness, his lack of fear. There's no way he could be so calm – Hell, he *isn't* calm. They might all die here, tonight, and it would be Will's fault. All of it would be Will's fault.

But at least, he can't help thinking, it would all be over.

He wraps his arms around his stomach, pressing on the bandages, and sits down on the chair Hannibal pulls out for him. They have the PX and EMF on the table, at the head, where

Hannibal sits. Francis takes his right side, laptop powered on and shining a white glow onto his face.

Hannibal stands, and dims the lights. Francis' backup lights with their own generator power on, illuminating the space so that there are no dark corners, no places to creep up on them except down the hallway. The study and kitchen lights are on, but even if they flicker out, Francis' lights will remain. Hopefully.

He feels a prickle along the back of his neck and swallows down his fear as best he can. He can't quite push it past the base of his throat.

"Might as well start now," Francis says, and gestures to Hannibal to use the PX.

Hannibal leans in, presses the button down, and speaks.

"Lady of the house," he begins. "My name is Hannibal Lecter. I'm here, with Will, who stayed with you for a time." He makes it sound so cordial, like the nightmare of Will's life is nothing more than a pleasant summer trip. Bitterness coats his tongue and he squeezes himself tighter. "Francis is here as well. We are all friends, and mean neither you nor Will any harm."

He holds the button down for a while longer as Francis bade him, then releases it. Francis looks up at them and shakes his head. Nothing on the recordings.

Hannibal presses the button and tries again:

"We understand you are trying to speak to us. You want to tell us something. Please, speak freely. We are eager and willing to listen."

There's more silence, for so long Will might actually scream just to break it, and then, very abruptly, every single light cuts out.

He jolts in fear, reaching for Hannibal and seizing his wrist in a fierce grip. The glow of Francis' laptop screen is the only illumination, revealing his wide, frightened eyes, his pale face. Will squeezes Hannibal's wrist so tight he can feel the bones grinding together.

Hannibal doesn't falter. "Lady of the house," he says into the PX. "Are you here?"

There's a stuttering whine, the EMF reader lights up all the way to the red side of the dial. The lights flicker, coming on one by one like lighting up a runway. The PX crackles loudly, sharp enough Will winces. The temperature drops to freezing, their breath misting, the sensors beeping their frantic alarm.

"*Han…Nib….Ball….*"

"Oh God," Will whispers, barely audible. Sweat coats his skin like tar, he's shaking and so weak that, if he had to, he's not sure he could even run, let alone stand. He digs his nails into the table and holds on for dear life. He's going to be sick. The wounds on his stomach and face burn like they're being covered with red-hot coals.

“*Alpha*...” the PX screeches.

“Alpha,” Francis echoes.

Will is definitely going to be sick.

“*Alpha*!” the PX whines. “*Alpha, Alpha,* Alpha*!*”

The lights all flare on, blinding bright, and then everything goes dark.

Everything, except a single light in the kitchen.

Ragged breathing splits the silence, and every inch of Will goes cold with fear.

“She’s here,” he whispers.

“*Alpha*,” the lady of the house snarls.

Chapter End Notes

sorry it's a shorter chapter with a cliffhanger but y'know, I'm a little shit sometimes, so

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!